



14

Tsutomu Sato
Illustration Kana Ishida

The
Irregular at
Magic High
School

Ancient City Insurrection Arc ①



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Magic High
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Miyuki Shiba

Class 2-A. Tatsuya's younger sister. Honors student who was the class representative last year. Cooling magic is her specialty. Adores her brother. Has a severe brother complex.

Tatsuya Shiba

The older brother of the Shiba siblings. In Class 2-E of the National Magic University First Affiliated High School. In all matters not related to his sister, Miyuki, whom he is duty bound to protect as her Guardian, Tatsuya is philosophical and detached.





It is she who
controls Tatsuya Shiba,
the most terrible of
magical weapons, from
the shadows.

She is the
strongest magician
of this generation—but
what is her true aim?

Maya Yotsuba

Current head of the Yotsuba family, Tatsuya's aunt. A magician known by several aliases, such as Demon of the East and Queen of the Night.

The Irregular at Magic High School

ANCIENT CITY INSURRECTION ARC ①

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ON
NEW YORK

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THE IRREGULAR AT MAGIC HIGH SCHOOL

TSUTOMU SATO

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An irregular older brother with a certain flaw.

An honor roll younger sister who is perfectly flawless.

*When the two siblings enrolled in Magic High School, a dramatic
life unfolded—*

Character



Tatsuya Shiba

Class 2-E. Advanced to the newly established magic engineering course. Approaches everything in a detached manner. His sister Miyuki's Guardian.



Miyuki Shiba

Class 2-A. Tatsuya's younger sister; enrolled as the top student last year. Specializes in freezing magic. Dotes on her older brother.



Leonhard Saijou

Class 2-F. Tatsuya's friend. Course 2 student. Specializes in hardening magic. Has a bright personality.



Erika Chiba

Class 2-F. Tatsuya's friend. Course 2 student. A charming troublemaker.



Mizuki Shibata

Class 2-E. In Tatsuya's class again this year. Has pushion radiation sensitivity. Serious and a bit of an airhead.



Mikihiko Yoshida

Class 2-B. This year he became a Course 1 student. From a famous family that uses ancient magic. Has known Erika since they were children.



Honoka Mitsui

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in light-wave vibration magic. Impulsive when emotional.



Shizuku Kitayama

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in vibration and acceleration magic. Doesn't show emotional ups and downs very much.



Subaru Satomi

Class 2-D. Frequently mistaken for a pretty boy. Cheerful and easy to get along with.

Eimi Akechi

Class 2-B. A quarter-blood. Full name is Amelia Eimi Akechi Goldie.



Akaha Sakurakouji

Class 2-B. Friends with Subaru and Amy. Wears gothic lolita clothes and loves theme parks.

Shun Morisaki

Class 2-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in CAD quick-draw. Takes great pride in being a Course 1 student.



Hagane Tomitsuka

Class 2-E. A magic martial arts user with the nickname "Range Zero." Uses magic martial arts.

Mayumi Saegusa

An alum and former student council president. Has advanced to Magic University. Has a devilish personality.



Azusa Nakajou

A senior. Student council president after Mayumi stepped down. Shy and has trouble expressing herself.

Suzune Ichihara

An alum and former student council treasurer. Calm, collected, and book smart. Mayumi's right hand.



Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori

A senior. Former student council vice president. Head of the club committee after Katsuto stepped down.

Mari Watanabe

An alum and former chairwoman of the disciplinary committee. Mayumi's good friend. Good all-around and likes a sporting fight.



Katsuto Juumonji

An alum and former head of the club committee. Has advanced to Magic University. "A boulder-like person," according to Tatsuya.

Midori Sawaki

A senior. Member of the disciplinary committee. Has a complex about his girlish name.



Kei Isori

A senior. Student council treasurer. Top grades in his class in magical theory. Engaged to Kanon Chiyoda.



Kanon Chiyoda

A senior. Chairwoman of the disciplinary committee after Mari stepped down. Engaged to Kei Isori.



Kasumi Saegusa

A new student who enrolled at Magic High School this year. Mayumi Saegusa's younger sister. Izumi's older twin sister. Energetic and lighthearted personality.



Izumi Saegusa

A new student who enrolled at Magic High School this year. Mayumi Saegusa's younger sister. Kasumi's younger twin sister. Meek and gentle personality.



Minami Sakurai

A new student who enrolled at Magic High School this year. In the position of Tatsuya and Miyuki's cousin. A Guardian candidate for Miyuki.

Koutarou Tatsumi

An alum and former member of the disciplinary committee. Has a heroic and dynamic personality.

Isao Sekimoto

An alum and former member of the disciplinary committee. Lost the school election. Committed acts of spying.

Takeaki Kirihara

A senior. Member of the *kenjutsu* club. Kanto Junior High Kenjutsu Tournament champion.



Sayaka Mibu

A senior. Member of the kendo club. Placed second in the nation at the girls' junior high kendo tournament.



Takuma Shippou

The head of this year's new students. Course 1. Eldest son of the Shippou, one of the Eighteen, families with excellent magicians.



Kento Sumisu

Class 1-G. A Caucasian boy whose parents are naturalized Japanese citizens from the USNA.

Koharu Hirakawa

An alum and engineer during the Nine School Competition. Withdrew from the Thesis Competition.



Chiaki Hirakawa

Class 2-E. Holds enmity toward Tatsuya.

Masaki Ichijou

A junior at Third High. Participating in the Nine School Competition this year as well. Direct heir to the Ichijou family, one of the Ten Master Clans.



Shinkurou Kichijouji

A junior at Third High. Participating in the Nine School Competition this year as well. Also known as Cardinal George.



Tomoko Chikura

A senior. Competitor in the women's solo Shields Down, a Nine School Competition event.

Tsugumi Igarashi

An alum.
Former biathlon club president.

Yousuke Igarashi

A junior. Tsugumi's younger brother.
Has a somewhat reserved personality.

Kerry Minakami

A senior. Male representative for the main Monolith Code event at the Nine School Competition.

Satomi Asuka

First High nurse. Gentle, calm, and warm. Smile popular among male students.

Kazuo Tsuzura

First High teacher. Main field is magic geometry. Manager of the Thesis Competition team.

Gouki Ichijou

Masaki's father. Current head of the Ichijou, one of the Ten Master Clans.

Midori Ichijou

Masaki's mother.
Warm and good at cooking.



Akane Ichijou

Eldest daughter of the Ichijou.
Masaki's younger sister. Enrolled in an elite private middle school this year. Likes Shinkurou.



Ruri Ichijou

Second daughter of the Ichijou.
Masaki's younger sister. Stable and does things her own way.



Jennifer Smith

A Caucasian naturalized as a Japanese citizen. Instructor for Tatsuya's class and for magic engineering classes.

Harumi Naruse

Shizuku's older cousin. Student at National Magic University Fourth Affiliated High School.



Yakumo Kokonoe

A user of an ancient magic called *ninjutsu*. Tatsuya's martial arts master.

Retsu Kudou

Renowned as the strongest magician in the world. Given the honorary title of Sage.

Makoto Kudou

Son of Retsu Kudou, elder of Japan's magic world, and current head of the Kudou family.



Minoru Kudou

Makoto's son. Freshman at National Magic University Second Affiliated High School, but hardly attends due to frequent illness. Also Kyouko Fujibayashi's younger brother by a different father.

Mamoru Kuki

One of the Eighteen Support Clans. Follows the Kudou family. Calls Retsu Kudou "Sensei" out of respect.



Maki Sawamura

An actress who has been nominated for best actress in a leading role at various distinguished movie awards. Acknowledged not only for her beauty but also her acting skills.

Haruka Ono

A general counselor of Class 1-E. Tends to get bullied, but has another face.



Gongjin Zhou

A handsome young man who brought Lu and Chen to Japan. A mysterious figure who hangs out in Chinatown.



Xiangshan Chen

Leader of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Has a heartless personality.



Ganghu Lu

The ace magician of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Also known as the Man-Eating Tiger.



Rin

A girl Morisaki saved. Her full name is Meiling Sun. The new leader of the Hong Kong-based international crime syndicate No-Head Dragon.





Toshikazu Chiba

Erika Chiba's oldest brother. Has a career in the Ministry of Police. A playboy at first glance.

Harunobu Kazama

Commanding officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked major.



Naotsugu Chiba

Erika Chiba's second-oldest brother. Possesses full mastery of the Chiba (thousand blades) style of *kenjutsu*. Nicknamed "Kirin Child of the Chiba."

Shigeru Sanada

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked captain.



Inagaki

An inspector with the Ministry of Police. Toshikazu Chiba's subordinate.

Kyouko Fujibayashi

Female officer serving as Kazama's aide. Ranked second lieutenant.



Anna Rosen Katori

Erika's mother. Half Japanese and half German; was the mistress of Erika's father, the current leader of the Chiba.

Hiromi Saeki

Brigadier general of the Japan Ground Defense Force's 101st Brigade. Ranked major general. Superior officer to Harunobu Kazama, commanding officer of the Independent Magic Battalion. Due to her appearance, she is also known as the Silver Fox.

Ushio Kitayama

Shizuku's father. Big shot in the business world. His business name is Ushio Kitagata.

Muraji Yanagi

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked captain.

Benio Kitayama

Shizuku's mother. Once an A-rank magician known for her oscillation magic.

Kousuke Yamanaka

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade's Independent Magic Battalion. Physician ranked major. First-rate healing magician.



Wataru Kitayama

Shizuku's younger brother. Sixth grade. Dearly loves his older sister. Aims to be a magic engineer.

Sakai

Belongs to the Japan Ground Defense Force's general headquarters. Ranked colonel. Seen as staunchly anti-Great Asian Alliance.

Kouichi Saegusa

Mayumi's father and the current leader of the Saegusa. Also a top-top-class magician.

Saburou Nakura

A powerful magician employed by the Saegusa family. Mainly serves as Mayumi's personal bodyguard.



Miya Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's actual mother. Deceased. The only magician skilled in mental construction interference magic.



Honami Sakurai

Miya's Guardian. Deceased. Part of the first generation of the Sakura series, engineered magicians with strengthened magical capacity through genetic modification.



Sayuri Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's stepmother. Dislikes them.

Ushiyama

Manager of Four Leaves Technology's CAD R & D Section 3. A person in whom Tatsuya places his trust.

Ernst Rosen

A prominent CAD manufacturer. President of Rosen Magicraft's Japanese branch.



Pixie

A home helper robot belonging to Magic High School. Official name: 3H (Humanoid Home Helper: a human-shaped chore-assisting robot) type P-94.

Maya Yotsuba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's aunt. Miya's younger twin sister. The current head of the Yotsuba.

Hayama

An elderly butler employed by Maya.

Mitsugu Kuroba

Miya Shiba and Maya Yotsuba's cousin. Father of Ayako and Fumiya.

Ayako Kuroba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's second cousin. Has a younger twin brother named Fumiya. Student at Fourth High.



Fumiya Kuroba

A candidate for next head of the Yotsuba. Tatsuya and Miyuki's second cousin. Has an older twin sister named Ayako. Student at Fourth High.



Angelina Kudou Shields

Commander of the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is major. Nickname is Lina. Also one of the Thirteen Apostles, strategic magicians.



Virginia Balance

The USNA Joint Chiefs of Staff Information Bureau Internal Inspection Office's first deputy commissioner. Ranked colonel. Came to Japan in order to support Lina.

Silvia Mercury First

A planet-class magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is warrant officer. Her nickname is Silvie, and Mercury First is her code name. During their mission in Japan, she serves as Major Sirius's aide.



Benjamin Canopus

Number two in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is major. Takes command when Major Sirius is absent.

Mikaela Hongou

An agent sent into Japan by the USNA (although her real job is magic scientist for the Department of Defense). Nicknamed Mia.



Claire

Hunter Q—a female soldier in the magician unit Stardust for those who couldn't be Stars. Q refers to the 17th of the pursuit unit.

Alfred Fomalhaut

A first-degree star magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Rank is first lieutenant. Nicknamed Freddie. Currently AWOL.

Rachel

Hunter R—a female soldier in the magician unit Stardust for those who couldn't be Stars. R refers to the 18th of the pursuit unit.

Charles Sullivan

A satellite-class magician in the USNA's magician unit, the Stars. Called by the code name Deimos Second. Currently AWOL.

Raymond S. Clark

A student at the high school in Berkeley, USNA, that Shizuku studies abroad at. A Caucasian boy who wastes no time making advances on Shizuku. Is secretly one of the Seven Sages.



Gu Jie

One of the Seven Sages. Also known as Gide Hague. A survivor of a Dahanese military's mage unit.

Glossary



Course 1 student emblem



Tatsuya Shiba's CAD



Miyuki Shiba's CAD

Magic High School

Nickname for high schools affiliated with the National Magic University. There are nine schools throughout the nation. Of them, First High through Third High each adopt a system of Course 1 and Course 2 students to split up its two hundred incoming freshmen.

Blooms, Weeds

Slang terms used at First High to display the gap between Course 1 and Course 2 students. Course 1 student uniforms feature an eight-petaled emblem embroidered on the left breast, but Course 2 student uniforms do not.

CAD (Casting Assistant Device)

A device that simplifies magic casting. Magical programming is recorded within. There are many types and forms, some specialized and others multipurpose.

Four Leaves Technology (FLT)

A domestic CAD manufacturer. Originally more famous for magical-product engineering than for developing finished products, the development of the Silver model has made them much more widely known as a maker of CADs.

Taurus Silver

A genius engineer said to have advanced specialized CAD software by a decade in just a single year.

Eidos (individual information bodies)

Originally a term from Greek philosophy. In modern magic, *eidos* refers to the information bodies that accompany events. They form a so-called record of those events existing in the world and can be considered the footprints of an object's state of being in the universe, be that active or passive. The definition of *magic* in its modern form is that of a technology that alters events by altering the information bodies composing them.

Idea (information body dimension)

Originally a term from Greek philosophy; pronounced "ee-dee-ah." In modern magic, *Idea* refers to the *platform* upon which information bodies are recorded—a spell, object, or energy's *dimension*. Magic is primarily a technology that outputs a magic program (a spell sequence) to affect the Idea (the dimension), which then rewrites the *eidos* (the individual bodies) recorded there.

Activation Sequence

The blueprints of magic, and the programming that constructs it. Activation sequences are stored in a compressed format in CADs. The magician sends a psionic wave into the CAD, which then expands the data and uses it to convert the activation sequence into a signal. This signal returns to the magician with the unpacked magic program.

Psions (thought particles)

Massless particles belonging to the dimension of spirit phenomena. These information particles record awareness and thought results. Eidos are considered the theoretical basis for modern magic, while activation sequences and magic programs are the technology forming its practical basis. All of these are bodies of information made up of psions.

Pushions (spirit particles)

Massless particles belonging to the dimension of spirit phenomena. Their existence has been confirmed, but their true form and function have yet to be elucidated. In general, magicians are only able to sense energized pushions. The technical term for them is *psycheons*.

Magician

An abbreviation of *magic technician*. *Magic technician* is the term for those with the skills to use magic at a practical level.

Magic program

An information body used to temporarily alter information attached to events. Constructed from psions possessed by the magician. Sometimes shortened to *magigram*.

Magic-calculation region

A mental region that constructs magic programs. The essential core of the talent of magic. Exists within the magician's unconscious regions, and though he or she can normally consciously use the magic-calculation region, they cannot perceive the processing happening within. The magic-calculation region may be called a black box, even for the magician performing the task.

Magic program output process

- ❶ Transmit an activation sequence to a CAD. This is called "reading in an activation sequence."
- ❷ Add variables to the activation sequence and send them to the magic-calculation region.
- ❸ Construct a magic program from the activation sequence and its variables.
- ❹ Send the constructed magic program along the "route"—between the lowest part of the conscious mind and highest part of the unconscious mind—then send it out the "gate" between conscious and unconscious, to output it onto the Idea.
- ❺ The magic program outputted onto the Idea interferes with the eidos at designated coordinates and overwrites them.

With a single-type, single-process spell, this five-stage process can be completed in under half a second. This is the bar for practical-level use with magicians.

Magic evaluation standards

The speed with which one constructs psionic information bodies is one's magical throughput, or processing speed. The scale and scope of the information bodies one can construct is one's magical capacity. The strength with which one can overwrite eidos with magic programs is one's influence. These three together are referred to as a person's magical power.

Cardinal Code hypothesis

A school of thought claiming that within the four families and eight types of magic, there exist foundational plus and minus magic programs, for sixteen in all, and that by combining these sixteen, one can construct every possible typed spell.

Typed magic

Any magic belonging to the four families and eight types.

Exotyped magic

A term for spells that control mental phenomena rather than physical ones. Encompasses many fields, from divine magic and spirit magic—which employs spiritual presences—to mind reading, astral form separation, and consciousness control.

Ten Master Clans

The most powerful magician organization in Japan. The ten families are chosen every four years from among twenty-eight: Ichijou, Ichinokura, Isshiki, Futatsugi, Nikaidou, Nihei, Mitsuya, Mikazuki, Yotsuba, Itsuwa, Gotou, Itsumi, Mutsuzuka, Rokkaku, Rokugou, Roppongi, Saegusa, Shippou, Tanabata, Nanase, Yatsushiro, Hassaku, Hachiman, Kudou, Kuki, Kuzumi, Juumonji, and Tooyama.

Numbers

Just like the Ten Master Clans contain a number from one to ten in their surname, well-known families in the Hundred Families use numbers eleven or greater, such as Chiyoda (thousand), Isori (fifty), and Chiba (thousand). The value isn't an indicator of strength, but the fact that it is present in the surname is one measure to broadly judge the capacity of a magic family by their bloodline.

Non-numbers

Also called Extra Numbers, or simply Extras. Magician families who have been stripped of their number. Once, when magicians were weapons and experimental samples, this was a stigma between the success cases, who were given numbers, and the failure cases, who didn't display good enough results.



Various Spells

- **Cocytus**

Outer magic that freezes the mind. A frozen mind cannot order the flesh to die, so anyone subject to this magic enters a state of mental stasis, causing their body to stop. Partial crystallization of the flesh is sometimes observed because of the interaction between mind and body.

- **Rumbling**

An old spell that vibrates the ground as a medium for a spirit, an independent information body.

- **Program Dispersion**

A spell that dismantles a magic program, the main component of a spell, into a group of psionic particles with no meaningful structure. Since magic programs affect the information bodies associated with events, it is necessary for the information structure to be exposed, leaving no way to prevent interference against the magic program itself.

- **Program Demolition**

A typeless spell that rams a mass of compressed psionic particles directly into an object without going through the Idea, causing it to explode and blow away the psionic information bodies recorded in magic, such as activation sequences and magic programs. It may be called magic, but because it is a psionic bullet without any structure as a magic program for altering events, it isn't affected by Information Boost or Area Interference. The pressure of the bullet itself will also repel any Cast Jamming effects. Because it has zero physical effect, no obstacle can block it.

- **Mine Origin**

A magic that imparts strong vibrations to anything with a connotation of "ground"—such as dirt, crag, sand, or concrete—regardless of material.

- **Fissure**

A spell that uses spirits, independent information bodies, as a medium to push a line into the ground, creating the appearance of a fissure opening in the earth.

- **Dry Blizzard**

A spell that gathers carbon dioxide from the air, creates dry-ice particles, then converts the extra heat energy from the freezing process to kinetic energy to launch the dry-ice particles at a high speed.

- **Slithering Thunders**

In addition to condensing the water vapor from Dry Blizzard's dry-ice evaporation and creating a highly conductive mist with the evaporated carbon dioxide in it, this spell creates static electricity with vibration-type magic and emission-type magic. A combination spell, it also fires an electric attack at an enemy using the carbon gas-filled mist and water droplets as a conductor.



- **Niflheim**

A vibration- and deceleration-type area-of-effect spell. It chills a large volume of air, then moves it to freeze a wide range. In blunt terms, it creates a super-large refrigerator. The white mist that appears upon activation is the particles of frozen ice and dry ice, but at higher levels, a mist of frozen liquid nitrogen occurs.

- **Burst**

A dispersion-type spell that vaporizes the liquid inside a target object. When used on a creature, the spell will vaporize bodily fluids and cause the body to rupture. When used on a machine powered by internal combustion, the spell vaporizes the fuel and makes it explode. Fuel cells see the same result, and even if no burnable fuel is on board, there is no machine that does not contain some liquid, such as battery fluid, hydraulic fluid, coolant, or lubricant; once Burst activates, virtually any machine will be destroyed.

- **Disheveled Hair**

An old spell that, instead of specifying a direction and changing the wind's direction to that, uses air current control to bring about the vague result of "tangling" it, causing currents along the ground that entangle an opponent's feet in the grass. Only usable on plains with grass of a certain height.

◀ Magic Swords

Aside from fighting techniques that use magic itself as a weapon, another method of magical combat involves techniques for using magic to strengthen and control weapons. The majority of these spells combine magic with projectile weapons such as guns and bows, but the art of the sword, known as *kenjutsu*, has developed in Japan as well as a way to link magic with sword techniques. This has led to magic technicians formulating personal-use magic techniques known as magic swords, which can be said to be both modern magic and old magic.

1. High-Frequency Blade

A spell that locally liquefies a solid body and cleaves it by causing a blade to vibrate at a high speed, then propagate the vibration that exceeds the molecular cohesive force of matter it comes in contact with. Used as a set with a spell to prevent the blade from breaking.

2. Pressure Cut

A spell that generates left-right perpendicular repulsive force relative to the angle of a slashing blade edge, causing the blade to force apart any object it touches and thereby cleave it. The size of the repulsive field is less than a millimeter, but it has the strength to interfere with light, so when seen from the front, the blade edge becomes a black line.

3. *Douji-Giri* (Simultaneous Cut)

An old-magic spell passed down as a secret sword art of the Genji. It is a magic sword technique wherein the user remotely manipulates two blades through a third in their hands in order to have the swords surround an opponent and slash simultaneously. *Douji* is the Japanese pronunciation for both "simultaneous" and "child," so this ambiguity was used to keep the inherited nature of the technique a secret.

4. Zantetsu (Iron Cleaver)

A secret sword art of the Chiba clan. Rather than defining a katana as a hunk of steel and iron, this movement spell defines it as a single concept, then the spell moves the katana along a slashing path set by the magic program. The result is that the katana is defined as a monomolecular blade, never breaking, bending, or chipping as it slices through any objects in its path.

5. Jinrai Zantetsu (Lightning Iron Cleaver)

An expanded version of Zantetsu that makes use of the *Ikazuchi-Maru*, a personal-armament device. By defining the katana and its wielder as one collective concept, the spell executes the entire series of actions, from enemy contact to slash, incredibly quickly and with faultless precision.

6. Mountain Tsunami

A secret sword art of the Chiba clan that makes use of the *Orochi-Maru*, a giant personal weapon six feet long. The user minimizes their own inertia and that of their katana while approaching an enemy at a high speed and, at the moment of impact, adds the neutralized inertia to the blade's inertia and slams the target with it. The longer the approach run, the greater the false inertial mass, reaching a maximum of ten tons.

7. *Usuba Kagerou* (Antlion)

A spell that uses hardening magic to anchor a five-nanometer-thick sheet of woven carbon nanotube to a perfect surface and make it a blade. The blade that *Usuba Kagerou* creates is sharper than any sword or razor, but the spell contains no functions to support moving the blade, demanding technical sword skill and ability from the user.

Strategic Magicians: The Thirteen Apostles

Because modern magic was born into a highly technological world, only a few nations were able to develop strong magic for military purposes. As a result, only a handful were able to develop "strategic magic," which rivaled weapons of mass destruction.

However, these nations shared the magic they developed with their allies, and certain magicians of allied nations with high aptitudes for strategic magic came to be known as strategic magicians.

As of April 2095, there are thirteen magicians publicly recognized as strategic magicians by their nations. They are called the Thirteen Apostles and are seen as important factors in the world's military balance. The Thirteen Apostles' nations, names, and strategic spell names are listed below.

USNA

Angie Sirius: Heavy Metal Burst

Elliott Miller: Leviathan

Laurent Barthes: Leviathan

* The only one belonging to the Stars is Angie Sirius. Elliott Miller is stationed at Alaska Base, and Laurent Barthes outside the country at Gibraltar Base, and for the most part, they don't move.

New Soviet Union

Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov: Tuman Bomba

Leonid Kondratenko: Zemlja Armija

* As Kondratenko is of advanced age, he generally stays at the Black Sea Base.

Great Asian Alliance

Yunde Liu: Pilita (Thunderclap Tower)

* Yunde Liu died in the October 31, 2095, battle against Japan.

Indo-Persian Federation

Barat Chandra Khan: Agni Downburst

Japan

Mio Itsuwa: Abyss

Brazil

Miguel Diez: Synchroliner Fusion

* This magic program was named by the USNA.

England

William MacLeod: Ozone Circle

Germany

Karla Schmidt: Ozone Circle

* Ozone Circle is based on a spell codeveloped by nations in the EU before its split as a means to fix the hole in the ozone layer. The magic program was perfected by England and then publicized to the old EU through a convention.

Turkey

Ali Sahin: Bahamut

* This magic program was developed in cooperation with the USNA and Japan, then provided to Turkey by Japan.

Thailand

Somchai Bunnag: Agni Downburst

* This magic program was provided by Indo-Persia.

The International Situation State of the World in 2096



World War III, also called the Twenty Years' Global War Outbreak, was directly triggered by global cooling, and it fundamentally redrew the world map.

The USA annexed Canada and the countries from Mexico to Panama to form the United States of North America, or the USNA.

Russia reabsorbed Ukraine and Belarus to form the New Soviet Union.

China conquered northern Burma, northern Vietnam, northern Laos, and the Korean Peninsula to form the Great Asian Alliance, or GAA.

India and Iran absorbed several central Asian countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan) and South Asian countries (Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) to form the Indo-Persian Federation.

The other Asian and Arab countries formed regional military alliances to resist the three superpowers: the New Soviet Union, GAA, and the Indo-Persian Federation.

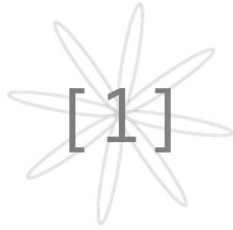
Australia chose national isolation.

The EU failed to unify and split into an eastern and a western section bordered by Germany and France. These east-west groupings also failed to form unions and now are actually weaker than they were before unification.

Africa saw half its nations destroyed altogether, with the surviving ones barely managing to retain urban control.

South America, excluding Brazil, fell into small, isolated states administered on a local government level.

The Irregular at
Magic High School



Ninefold Temple, where Yakumo Kokonoe served as head priest, stood atop a small hill in Fuchu, a part of old Tokyo city. The temple was devoted to volunteer activities involving *manual labor*—which those from the temple would describe as “part of their training”—and was such a common sight in the neighborhood by now that at some point it had merged with local society and become an indispensable part of the town’s scenery.

Which was why, if a person from this town had the chance to examine an older map, even one from just a century ago, they would have stumbled upon a significant surprise:

They’d learn there had been no temple here originally.

They’d learn there had been no hill here at all.

In the latter part of the Twenty Years’ Global War Outbreak, a metropolitan area defense force had been stationed in Chofu, Fuchu, and Mitaka’s Musashino area, using the Chofu Airfield as their base of operations. This meant that the residents of those areas had been evacuated for about ten years, in accordance with the principle of separation of military and civilians. The hill on which the Ninefold Temple stood had been made from earth excavated from the construction site for a large-scale underground defense facility located here.

Unfortunately, the wider metropolitan area didn’t make it through the war without its own damages. Thanks to this Musashino Antiair Fortress, however, they were able to keep damage to these old city areas to zero. The defensive position itself, on the other hand, had come under attack by several forces; but in that sense as well, one could say the residents’ evacuation hadn’t been in vain.

All this resulted in an inevitably blank slate in the relationship between the town and its residents. The people only returned to their “homes” after the war ended and the town had been rebuilt at the government’s expense. However, it was far from a perfect replica of how it had been before.

When time came to shut down the underground defense facility, the authorities didn’t dismantle it—they’d only sealed its entrance. That, plus the rezoning, meant a not insignificant number of families were unable to return to their former dwellings. A promptly introduced advanced public transportation system had given a somewhat futuristic flair to the new town’s scenery, too.

The elevated tracks to run cabinets—a high-density form of public transportation for carrying small groups—weren’t the only new additions. New things, traditional things, facilities big and small, were added onto the townscape. The expansive temple built on the small hill, the Ninefold Temple, was established around this time.

It would be slightly—no, *very*—difficult to call this temple’s origins *normal*. As a reward for his cooperation with Magician Development Institute Nine, the previous head priest, Yakumo’s master, had been given this facility-slash-residence as a base to train disciples—the implication being that he would have *shinobi* disciples rather than regular monks-in-training.

For that reason, the Ninefold Temple’s outer appearance was designed to look especially old-fashioned as a means of camouflage. The aboveground area inside its walls had also been done in a style cognizant of the twentieth century.

In contrast, the basement housing the training facility was very, very deep underground and boasted an area vaster than the temple’s surface plot of land, was decked out with cutting-edge technology—and not only for ancient magic training. It was currently one of the highest-level modern magic training facilities out there.

When Kazama had introduced Tatsuya to Yakumo, he’d done so with this underground facility in mind. Yakumo’s skills as a martial arts teacher made him one of the best in the field. That said, Kazama’s intentions didn’t stop at improving Tatsuya’s fighting abilities. He hadn’t roped Tatsuya into the army so he could be a *regular* close-combat soldier. He wanted to develop the abilities

of an extremely powerful magician who could fight on the front lines no matter what the conditions.

Instruction in martial arts and a facility where magical training was possible: When Kazama learned that Tatsuya's home was so close to the Ninefold Temple that they might as well have been next-door neighbors, he had no choice but to take advantage of it.

At the moment, Tatsuya was in the lowest level of the Ninefold Temple's underground training facility. The walls, floor, and ceiling had been built in three layers; starting from the inside, there was a layer of concrete ten centimeters thick, then a layer of lead thirty centimeters thick, and finally a layer of neutron-insulating concrete sixty centimeters thick.

It wasn't a nuclear shelter. This was a room for magical training, from top to bottom. Why, then, was such strict insulation necessary? The reason had to do with how magic had advanced in the twenty-first century.

Modern magic research and development could trace its origins to a 1999 incident when a single American police officer stopped a nuclear terrorist attack using a strange ability, something people still called *psychic powers* at the time. Accordingly, modern magic R & D's primary objective in its early days was to pursue methods to combat nuclear threats—specifically stopping and controlling nuclear fission as well as blocking and neutralizing radiation.

The focused research efforts had borne fruit. They had made so much progress that it was possible to claim that neutron barriers and gamma-ray filters were as good as completed. Nevertheless, the development and improvement of techniques to combat nuclear concepts continued to be frequently cited as a crucial facet of magic skill development.

What Tatsuya was trying to do in this room, though, was neither practicing magic to block radiation nor improving magic techniques to better control nuclear fission. In a certain sense, it was just the opposite.

The underground training room was currently serving as a pool. They hadn't poured in the water so Tatsuya could swim, though. With the water up to his shoulders, Tatsuya wore short-sleeved training gear and held a handgun-shaped CAD. It wasn't exactly a swimming outfit, but his face and hair were still both

soaking wet.

Gripped in his right hand was something other than his favored custom Silver Horn. Anyone could tell from a glance at its unadorned surface that he was currently using a prototype. The greatest difference of all was a bayonet-like object fixed to the underside of its barrel. Bayonet-*like*, because the attachment was nothing but a thick metal sheet without any blade or edge, fastened in the style of a bayonet.

With his right hand below the water's surface, Tatsuya pulled the trigger. *Two* activation sequences expanded underwater before being absorbed into his right arm. One of them was the output from the handgun CAD. The other was from the bayonet-like attachment.

The magic programs acted on the attachment. Water bubbled at the CAD's tip. Tatsuya let out a groan through clenched teeth, then fell to his knees, dropping the CAD. His right hand had suffered a serious burn and was badly inflamed.

He sank into the water, up to the crown of his head. A moment later, he pulled himself together and stood up. His hair must have been soaking wet because he had been repeating this process over and over again. After taking many sharp breaths, Tatsuya lifted his right hand in front of his face, repeatedly closing and opening it. The lack of any burns was because he'd used Regenerate, but examining his hand was a partly unconscious act—the damage he suffered had run so deep that he couldn't immediately shake off the sensation of it.

Once he finally got the feeling back in his right hand, he reached into the water. His fingers grasped the CAD, which had floated up to the surface. It had lost its bayonet-like attachment before the CAD had even sunk to the floor, but that, too, had been Regenerated back to normal.

Tatsuya readied the CAD in the water again. But then a voice rang low near his ears from out of nowhere to stop him.

"Tatsuya, it's just about midnight."

It was an air vibration technique, its methodology the same as the one used by Silvia Mercury First, planet-class magician in the Stars, the USNA's magician

force; only the activation process differed. Yakumo had used it to whisper to Tatsuya from outside the room.

“...Yes, sir.”

Tatsuya answered normally, but he knew Yakumo would pick up his voice with the technique.

Sure enough, immediately after Tatsuya agreed to end the training, the water filling the room began to drain away. After waiting for it to completely recede, he used a dispersion-type spell to pull the moisture from his skin, hair, and clothes.

Given his level of magic power, he couldn't hope to get himself perfectly dry. Still, he could get out enough water to the point where it wouldn't cause much issue. After finishing up, he operated the door switch on the other side of the wall using a weighting-type spell. Electronic devices couldn't be built into the wall partitions because of the room's properties.

This would be a locked room if you couldn't use magic...

Tatsuya belatedly had that thought as he put a hand on the ladder leading back to the surface. After all, Yakumo had cut the power to the elevator.



Sunday, September 23, 2096. Despite having gotten back home right before the date changed last night, Tatsuya had gone out for early-morning training again today. Once she learned that from the message he'd left on their home server, Miyuki started to get a little worried about him not long after waking up.

Her older brother wasn't one to stop even if she told him not to push himself too hard. Well, he might listen to what she said *a little* if she used tears to get her way, but that, too, would only be temporary at best. She'd just used that feminine attack last month. With some resignation, she decided that she should save the tears for a moment slightly more important than this.

In the kitchen, Minami had already started getting breakfast ready. Recently, Miyuki and Minami had been getting on quite well, and they'd started taking turns when it came to meal prep. With how far home automation had come, nobody had to devote too much time to cooking, barring special occasions, and

the two had realized—albeit belatedly—that the sight of them fighting over the kitchen would have looked rather ridiculous from an outsider’s perspective.

Because of all that, Miyuki left the kitchen to Minami and headed to the bathroom.

In the changing room, she used the HAR, their Home Automation Robot, to take out a change of clothes for Tatsuya. His underwear was included in the bundle, too, but that was hardly enough to embarrass her.

Actually, when they’d been in their third year of middle school, she’d once wondered whether it would be better for her to feel a more maidenly sense of embarrassment when presented with male underwear, even if they *did* belong to her beloved brother. But when she’d privately imagined her cheeks reddening at the sight of his underwear, she changed her mind—such behavior would only make her a deviant, not a maiden. Though, if an outsider had seen her jubilant smile and attention to detail while preparing a shower for her elder brother, they’d maybe think it was too late to save her in more ways than one. (Of course, they’d never, ever say that to her face.)

She’d finished briskly preparing for her brother’s return home and was just about to set down a towel as the finishing touch when she suddenly hurried toward the front door, still holding the towel. She didn’t run in the house; that would be unladylike. (She made it a personal rule to never behave in a way that would bring shame on her brother, even if he wasn’t watching.)

The sound of the gate’s biometric authentication unlocking the door rang out through the living room and the kitchen. By the time Minami looked away from the cooking and left the kitchen, Miyuki was already waiting at the front door.

“Welcome home, Brother.”

“Thanks, I’m back.”

“...Welcome home, Big Brother Tatsuya.”

The slight pause between greetings was the time Minami had needed to reach the front door. She’d started moving right as the unlocking chime had sounded, but once again, Miyuki was way ahead of her. Back when Minami had first started living with them, she’d been unable to fully hide her frustration

when things like this happened. Lately, though, she'd entirely given up on it.

And that was the right attitude to have. Miyuki had precisely identified Tatsuya's presence when he was still over five meters away, and it wasn't as though they were in combat. Frankly, Miyuki was the stranger one. If anything, Minami's restraint in not making a face was enough to warrant praise.

"I've prepared your shower, Brother."

"Thanks."

As Tatsuya accepted the offered towel and headed for the bathroom, Miyuki followed after him, wearing a blissful smile.

Minami sighed to herself at the sight—even a live-in maid was permitted to vent sometimes.

It was Sunday, but because of previously mentioned circumstances, morning at the Shiba residence was progressing on its regular timetable—which meant that after breakfast came a leisurely teatime. Miyuki may have reached a compromise with Minami over breakfast prep, but she had yet to yield when it came to her brother's tea and coffee. Minami had learned to allot this time for cleaning and laundry instead, lest the saccharine mood cause her pain.

Once Tatsuya had paid some compliments to her coffee, Miyuki finally settled into her own seat, deciding to bring up something that'd been on her mind for a while. "Brother, there's something I'd like to ask you, if you don't mind."

"What is it?"

His wording was simple, but as usual, the tone he took toward his younger sister was gentle.

Emboldened, Miyuki cast off the remaining vestiges of her reservations. "Why are you not entered into this year's Thesis Competition? I understand that the stellar reactor experiment you conducted on campus in April exempted you from the responsibility of submitting a thesis of your choice like the other magic engineering students, but that doesn't mean you were forbidden from entering, does it?"

"Yeah, they didn't tell me I couldn't come or anything like that," he replied,

giving a smile while shaking his head, perhaps finding the idea that he'd be barred entry amusing.

"Then why...?"

"Because I don't have time."

Tatsuya's answer was just as short as the question Miyuki had asked, but it was more concise than hers.

"Does this...have anything to do with the magic you've been practicing until late every night?" pressed Miyuki somewhat hesitantly, unsure and scared of whether she should pry any further.

But Tatsuya left her no reason to worry. "It does. I'm surprised you figured it out." He reached a hand out to his sister's head and softly stroked her hair in praise.

The hesitation remaining in Miyuki's mind melted away at the gentle touch. "Could it be that you're struggling with the development of a new spell rather than magic practice?"

"I should have known—you have me all figured out, Miyuki."

Those words tickled Miyuki more than the hand caressing her hair, but she realized it was mostly flattery—or rather, a joke.

If he was simply trying to learn a preexisting spell, Tatsuya would never struggle that much. While his implanted virtual magic-calculation region had low magical output, one of its properties was that it could perfectly copy magic programs for use. As long as he could *fully* grasp a magic program's structure, Tatsuya could acquire the spell just prior to its activation, no matter what it was. From that point on, everything came down to his processing ability. If it was possible for him to cast the spell, he'd be able to use it immediately without practice; if he couldn't, then he'd never be able to use it, no matter how much he practiced. And given Tatsuya's *vision* combined with his analytical prowess, there was no magic program he couldn't analyze.

All this meant that his late-night struggles couldn't have been due to an existing spell.

“I started developing this spell in March. It actually took a while to nail down the theory at first. I only managed to get to the magic program design phase in June,” he stated. “It definitely wouldn’t be ready in time for the Thesis Competition,” he added with a smirk.

After hearing that, though, Miyuki couldn’t share his smile. First was because her older brother—the true identity of the mysterious magic engineering genius named Taurus Silver—had taken three whole months to understand the underlying theory of a spell. And second, the fact that he’d started development specifically in March...

“This new spell you’re wrestling with... Was your confrontation with Lina the reason you decided to pursue it?”

“I’m surprised you figured it out.”

Tatsuya’s answer was worded the same way as before, but the nuance was quite different. This time, surprise and praise were obvious. She’d arrived at a mostly correct answer with only a hint or two. He was genuinely impressed with her.

“The spell I’m developing right now is a close-combat direct-attack spell based on FAE theory.”

“FAE theory...? If I recall correctly, that was the theory Lina’s weapon used, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. The magic theory that is the foundation of the strategic portable magic weapon Lina used, the Brionac... FAE: Free After Execution.”

Tatsuya’s voice was brimming with emotion. Was it reverence toward the scientist who had created this nearly divine weapon, or had his spirit of competition been roused? To Miyuki, it felt like neither and yet also both.

“Events produced as a result of magical alteration shouldn’t occur in the world at all, and so right after the alteration takes place, the restrictions of the laws of physics loosen for a brief moment. The hypothesis states that under normal conditions, it becomes possible to execute a second spell using only a fraction of the power usually required as long as it’s cast during the short time lag before the laws of physics come into effect again.”

There, Tatsuya realized his own mistake, then shook his head, giving a pained grin. “No, not *hypothesis*. The Brionac has already proven that FAE theory is correct.”

“Brother, I apologize, but there is one part of what you’ve just said that I’ve been having difficulty understanding. Would you be able to explain?”

Miyuki wasn’t asking the question just to humor him; it grew out of academic curiosity, of wanting to seize this chance to resolve a question she had. If this had simply been some arcane theory, maybe she would’ve avoided troubling her brother. FAE theory, though, was related to the magic Lina had used. Miyuki couldn’t bear remaining ignorant.

“It’s okay—ask away.”

“Except for single-process ones, spells are constructed from several successive processes. With most of them, a second process will take effect by continuing the event alteration after inheriting it from the first process. But even with that sort of spell, it doesn’t feel as though activating the second or any subsequent process becomes any easier. Would that not run contrary to FAE theory?”

“I see...” Tatsuya nodded at the question, his face implying she’d struck him in a blind spot. “That may be the most common misunderstanding magicians have.”

But he wasn’t taken aback because her indication had been correct—no, he was very surprised that even a magician as excellent as Miyuki had a misconception of this magnitude.

“Misunderstanding, Brother?”

“The idea that a spell’s processes are in and of themselves independent spells.”

Miyuki frowned, confused. Tatsuya, however, had planned on this. “Take this spell, for example,” he said, opening the sugar pot’s lid before lifting a sugar cube out of it up to eye level, holding it there for one second, and then returning it to the pot once again, all without ever touching it.

“Brother... It may only be a seasoning, but I don’t believe playing with food is

appropriate.”

“Uh, right. Sorry.” When Miyuki immediately chided him, Tatsuya had no room to think of an excuse. Watching him apologize so sincerely brought an approving smile to Miyuki’s face.

“Anyway.” Feeling uncomfortable, as though their age dynamic had flipped, Tatsuya used a bit of force to get back on track. “I probably don’t need to tell you this, but the spell I used just now was Float. It’s a popular beginner-level spell and good for practice purposes. It has four processes in total: a weighting-type antigravity magic process to make the sugar cube float into the air; a movement-type magic process for suspending it in midair; a weighting-type gravity-control magic process to slowly lower it toward the sugar pot; and a movement-type suspension magic process to bring it to rest inside the pot without delivering an impact. But now that you mention it, explaining the steps like that makes it easy to misunderstand.”

“What part is incorrect?”

“Nothing’s incorrect. It’s just that this four-process spell creates the illusion that each of the processes can be considered its own independent spell.”

“That’s...an illusion?” said Miyuki, her confusion clearly persisting.

Tatsuya nodded deeply. “Float is a four-process spell, but those four processes comprise a single spell. Once the spell is cast, it constructs the magic program all the way up to that final suspension process, defines the variables, and then it’s done. If you don’t have enough magic power to cover all four of these processes...” He paused there, peering into Miyuki’s eyes to gauge her understanding. “The spell won’t break off midway through—it won’t work at all, starting from the initial antigravity process.”

Miyuki blinked in surprise. “You’re right... If each process really was an isolated spell, the whole spell would stop when your magic power ran out... It wouldn’t simply fail to activate from the outset.” As she murmured, she ruminated on what Tatsuya had just said. “Magic processes themselves aren’t independent spells. They’re nothing more than part of a single spell. That’s what you mean, isn’t it, Brother?”

“That’s right. You pick things up quickly, as always.”

Miyuki averted her eyes from his smile, blushing. Partly because she was simply embarrassed, but this time, it was more that she was ashamed of her failure to understand something this fundamental.

Tatsuya, for his part, hadn't been sarcastic at all; his praise had been sincere. Miyuki understood this, but that only made her feel more pathetic for not grasping the concept sooner, despite being *this* man's sister.

But she couldn't look away from him forever. She forced herself to smile at him.

"Well, it's tough to avoid misunderstanding stuff like this in an intuitive way, even if you theoretically understand the underlying logic really well, unless you actually *experience* it. Magic isn't an academic subject, after all—it's a skill. If you've never experienced a spell failing to cast, it's only natural that you'd never wonder about the why."

Tatsuya wasn't usually very sharp when it came to human emotions, but things were different when it came to Miyuki. As soon as he saw his sister feeling down, he immediately offered her words of encouragement.

"Anyway, the important part isn't why magic fails, but how magic processes are really just conveniences. When people in the past conceptualized the modern magic scheme of building magic programs out of activation sequences, it was just more convenient to break the magic program up into modules called *processes* in order to more efficiently describe the activation sequence."

And again, Miyuki wasn't dull enough to misunderstand that her brother was trying to cheer her up. Tatsuya had been considerate of her—*her*. That made her happy, and a little of the stiffness faded from her smile.

"Yes, Brother. Even I at last understand what you mean."

Miyuki playfully conked herself on the head, flashing a silly smile that seemed to say *Sorry your little sister is so slow*. The expression was such a huge departure from her normal demeanor—characterized by her too-beautiful features that could sometimes seem extremely cold—that one look was all it took to almost boot Tatsuya's mind into escapist mode.

"Magic processes are only parts of a spell. That's why magic-induced event

alterations are also singular entities even if they're brought about by more than one process. When a process ends, if the event alteration is still ongoing as a whole, then the spell hasn't taken place yet. That's why the end of a process doesn't provide the benefit of easier casting like FAE theory posits."

"...That's right. Full marks for that one, Miyuki."

Seeing his younger sister adorably tilting her head to the side threatened to almost knock Tatsuya out again. He'd tried to camouflage the unnatural silence by pretending to mull over her answer, but he didn't have any confidence that he'd managed to fool her.

And Miyuki's smile, opening up like a glorious blooming flower, refused all of Tatsuya's attempts at scrutiny.



How exactly are those two spending their days off?

Any student who knew enough about the Shiba siblings—meaning the majority of the First High student body—would run into this question at least once...

I bet they're spending the whole day like passionate lovers, using every passing moment to flirt with each other.

No way. I don't think even those two would go that far... At most, they're probably just going on dates all the time, right?

So naive. Those two? They're definitely going all the way...

...and it meant the spread of all sorts of rumors.

Their collective fantasies were partially accurate; it was true that the Shiba siblings spent their days off *quite* intimately, and they did go on dates.

This didn't happen all the time, though. In reality, Sundays often saw Tatsuya out of the house. Usually, he'd either be at the FLT labs or responding to a summons from the Independent Magic Battalion. The frequency of his outings had increased, perhaps due to not worrying as much about leaving Miyuki at home ever since Minami had joined the household.

However, unlike recently, Tatsuya had no plans for the day. And Miyuki hadn't

said that she wanted to go out, either. The reason for that wasn't the student council elections awaiting them at the end of the week but consideration for her brother's physical condition: His training had been leaving him exhausted lately.

If she could freely speak her mind about how she truly felt, Miyuki would've said that she didn't feel like having guests today, no matter who they were. And hosting their two current guests was something she especially wanted to refuse. Tatsuya and Miyuki couldn't let their guards down around this pair despite their familial bond; they couldn't show any vulnerability despite how they were supposed to be allies.

Those were no more than Miyuki's personal feelings, though her reasoning was based on the well-being of her older brother. If Tatsuya wouldn't send them away, then she had no choice (on the surface) but to welcome them as well.

After Minami showed them in, Tatsuya and Miyuki gestured toward the sofa. Once everyone settled into their seats, they addressed their guests amicably:

"Fumiya, Ayako, thanks for coming."

"Yes, welcome, both of you. Make yourselves comfortable."

Miyuki's attitude was very much an empty diplomatic one, and Tatsuya would never drop his mental guard around anyone other than his sister. Their public demeanor, though, was thoroughly friendly and affectionate.

"Thank you, Tatsuya. And you, too, Miyuki."

"It has been quite some time, hasn't it?"

In response, the Kuroba siblings' greetings were stiff and formal. There shouldn't have been this striking of an experience gap between them and Tatsuya and Miyuki; in terms of age, the twins, born in June, were sixteen, just like the March-born Miyuki. Setting aside for the moment whether a sixteen-year-old was an adult or a child, the two would have long since mastered the ability to conceal any nervousness, assuming nothing truly dire had happened.

In other words, the business they'd brought with them had to be gravely serious; Tatsuya and Miyuki both gleaned that from their attitude.

“Come to think of it, Fumiya—thanks for taking care of Minami last month.”

Fumiya looked flustered by Tatsuya’s sudden show of thanks. Minami, standing next to the sofa, gave a short bow.

“And you saved me time, too, by taking out the security detail.”

“O-oh... Right, that incident.”

With the words *taking out the security detail*, Fumiya finally realized Tatsuya was referring to the incident that took place on the last day of the Nines, in which he’d knocked out the security guards surrounding the van Minami was being held in.

“No, that was nothing, really, so...” muttered Fumiya, about to continue with *please don’t worry about it*.

But Tatsuya’s interruption was faster: “It’s not exactly to pay you back, but,” he said, “is there anything I can help with?”

Fumiya didn’t know how to respond. Beside him, Ayako heaved a sigh.

“...I swear,” she said. “We really don’t hold a candle to you, Tatsuya. The way you launch surprise attacks with that cool face of near-complete disregard for the feelings of others...” She shook her head, her expression seeming to say *What a bother*, then directed her gaze to her twin brother, who stiffened. “Fumiya, why don’t we take him up on his offer? We were simple messengers to begin with. It isn’t as though we have much of a choice.”

“R-right. Okay...”

Fumiya nodded, looking resigned, then he took out a normal-sized envelope from the inside pocket of his uniform jacket, which he was properly wearing despite it being Sunday.

The front was blank. Tatsuya accepted the offered envelope and turned it over. His brow furrowed slightly. Miyuki, who had peered toward her brother’s hands from the side, didn’t say a word—she only gasped and put a hand to her mouth.

The name of their aunt, Maya Yotsuba, was written on the back.

“By request of the family head, we’ve come to deliver this to you personally,”

said Fumiya.

Miyuki looked over at Tatsuya's profile. He met her gaze with a nod, then took the letter opener offered by Minami and broke the seal.

The envelope's contents were simple: a single sheet of letter paper. Tatsuya scanned it carefully until the end, then he handed it to his sister, who had been politely waiting for him to finish reading.

"Fumiya, do you know anything about what this says?"

Fumiya hesitated for a moment. "I do," he said, answering without seeking help from his older sister.

"I see." This time, Tatsuya directed his gaze to Miyuki. She'd just finished reading the letter herself. She shook her head a little, implying that she would leave this up to him. "It says here that she requests our cooperation in the capture of Gongjin Zhou...?"

"That's what I've heard as well."

This time, Tatsuya openly frowned. "I see. So it is a *request*, in the literal sense of the word, rather than a figure of speech."

Fumiya and Ayako nodded in unison.

Miyuki picked herself up and faced Tatsuya. "Brother... Why would Aunt Maya *request* something of us?"

Her question in full was why hadn't the head of the family simply ordered them to do something and instead requested it. Tatsuya felt exactly the same.

"On that point, she has a message for you."

"A message? One she couldn't even write down?"

In general, paper documents were more confidential than electronic data. If she hadn't even written it on paper, then what on earth could the message have been?

Ayako didn't directly answer that question, though. "Apparently, she would not mind were you to refuse this particular job."

"She said *what*?!"

After unintentionally raising her voice, Miyuki turned to *Tatsuya* and murmured, “I apologize,” embarrassed.

Tatsuya understood his sister’s astonishment. That said, he wasn’t that surprised. Maya was the head of the Yotsuba family, but because of Tatsuya’s position as a Guardian, orders from Miyuki took precedence. In addition, thanks to the secret accord between the Yotsuba family and the JGDF’s 101st Brigade, the latter had priority in commanding Tatsuya, excluding any missions relating to Miyuki’s well-being.

Miyuki viewed the Yotsuba family’s power as absolute—or rather, she tended to convince herself that no one could go against Maya’s orders because she didn’t understand the true power of other magician groups or military factions very well. Still, in reality, Maya couldn’t ignore the agreement between the Yotsuba family system and the military, either. And if she was to abide by those rules, there was almost nothing she could force Tatsuya to do.

Tatsuya was only obeying her because he was of the mind that it wasn’t yet time to oppose her. And that judgment wouldn’t change simply because she’d approached him with a humble attitude.

“Fumiya, tell Aunt Maya that I understand and accept.”

Miyuki and Ayako turned stares on Tatsuya that didn’t fully hide their surprise. Fumiya, however, bowed deeply to him. “Yes, I will,” he noted. “I’m sorry, Tatsuya.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“The mission to capture Gongjin Zhou was originally assigned to the Kuroba. We’ve produced nothing but disappointment, and now we have to burden you with our duty...”

The *disappointment* Fumiya spoke about referred to last month when they’d mobilized to capture Gongjin Zhou in Yokohama Chinatown at Maya’s orders. Not only had the current head, Mitsugu, suffered a grievous wound—his hand getting *bitten off*—but the Kuroba force’s encirclement had been broken, allowing Zhou to escape.

The shame was written all over Fumiya’s face as he explained.

“Fumiya, asking other people to help you isn’t a bad thing.”

Seeing that, Tatsuya uncharacteristically began playing the part of older brother.

“Especially if this was a Kuroba job. You shouldn’t hesitate to rely on me for anything, even if you have to swallow your pride to do it.”

“Tatsuya...?”

“I get the feeling that you want to do the tasks you were entrusted all by yourself. But it’s more important that the mission succeeds.”

Completing your own work with your strength alone was a manifestation of boyish perfectionism, which was but one aspect of the dangerous fastidiousness that children possessed.

“In some of *our* work, Fumiya, failure cannot be permitted.”

Tatsuya’s voice was harsh. But hidden within it was enough gentleness to make Miyuki envious.

“...You’re right. I misspoke.” And Fumiya didn’t need anyone to tell him that Tatsuya was worried about him. “I’m sorry—or rather, thank you, Tatsuya.”

As Fumiya lowered his head once again, Tatsuya returned an approving smile. “In any case, please tell me what you know so far,” he said, moving on to practical matters.

“Right. After escaping Yokohama, Zhou headed west by sea to flee into the Pacific, but we managed to stop him. After he landed in Ise, he traveled north, and we traced him to the Lake Biwa bridge, but then he evaded capture again. We believe he kept going that way and sneaked into the Kyoto region. Currently, we’re having our subordinates search the Oohara area.”

“Any information about possible supporters?”

“As far as we can tell, the Traditionalists are involved. They’re an organization of ancient magicians who are at odds with the families of the number Nine.”

“The Traditionalists, eh...”

“You know of them, Tatsuya?”

“I’ve heard a little from Master Yakumo. Not only have they gathered stray ancient magicians from throughout the country—they also seem to be plotting to bolster their organization by taking in immortalists, ancient magicians who have defected from the mainland. Come to think of it, some defected immortalists were apparently taking up with the Kudou family, too. Is there a possibility the Kudou are helping Zhou?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. Right after Zhou fled Yokohama, the immortalists who were with the Kudou family escaped old Lab Nine and joined the Traditionalists. And we didn’t only hear about this from the Kudou—we obtained direct confirmation of it as well.”

“The Traditionalists and the families of Nine joining forces behind the scenes is impossible... Which means we won’t have to worry about the Kudou turning on us.”

“Tatsuya?”

As Tatsuya stared into space, deep in thought, Ayako, who had left the explanation to her younger brother until now, hesitantly spoke his name.

“Nothing, sorry. Hearing that info is a big help.”

Catching the implication inside his gratitude that Tatsuya was done asking questions, Ayako rose from her seat alongside her brother.

While Tatsuya and Miyuki saw Fumiya and Ayako to the front door, Minami quickly tidied the table and prepared another serving of black tea. She no longer felt guilty about snatching opportunities like this from her master, Miyuki. Minami did properly respect Miyuki as her master while also revering her as a skilled magician and admiring her as a girl. But at the same time, she felt as though Miyuki was a slightly troubling master, one who detracted from Minami’s job as a maid. And her severe brother complex was a nuisance to everyone around them.

When she returned to the living room with the teacups, Tatsuya ordered her to sit down on the sofa where Fumiya had been sitting moments ago. Without a choice, she placed the cups in front of Tatsuya and Miyuki, then took her seat before noticing Tatsuya’s slight frown.

“Lord Tatsuya...?”

In Minami’s mind, Tatsuya was a much more sensible person than Miyuki—meaning he was much more fitting to be a master. The unease that washed over her that maybe she’d messed up somehow was no overreaction.

“Minami, could you get one more cup of tea?”

“Sir...?”

She realized she must have been making an awfully dumb expression in front of them, but she couldn’t keep the confusion from coming out on her face. *Is another guest coming?* she thought. *At this hour?*

“No, it’s not that.”

She hadn’t noticed it herself, but the question on her mind had been as plain on her face as her confusion had been. Tatsuya naturally picked up on it and flashed a slightly pained grin as he corrected her.

“What I meant was, this conversation might take a while. Get some for yourself, too.”

His explanation dispelled her doubts, but at the same time, it made her confused again.

He saw through that as well, though: “It wouldn’t be comfortable if Miyuki and I both had drinks but you didn’t.”

“...In that case, I will be right back.”

Stricken by a sense of defeat she didn’t quite understand, Minami dejectedly returned to the kitchen.

While waiting for Minami to come back to the sofa, Tatsuya opened Maya’s letter on the table. It was a single sheet of letter paper, on which only a brief matter was written. He tried using Elemental Sight to check the envelope and paper for additional information but found no particular trace of artifice.

“That means Aunt Maya’s request really *is* only to help them capture Gongjin Zhou,” he said, explaining the facts.

Suspicion thoroughly colored Miyuki’s face. “Why would Aunt Maya deliver it

in the form of a request instead of an order? She never does that.”

“I’m wondering about that, too. We won’t know the answer unless we ask her, but...”

Tatsuya looked at Miyuki, then turned his eyes on Minami. It wasn’t a harsh glare or anything. Nevertheless, tension jolted through Minami’s spine.

“The two of you may not realize this, but Aunt Maya has never had the power to give me an order. Or more precisely, she does, but her commands have a low priority.”

Surprise and wonder became apparent on their faces. Miyuki and Minami both put a hand to their respective mouths; was it a fruit of their education on etiquette, or had the maid taken on a shade of the master?

“Ensuring Miyuki’s safety is my highest priority, needless to say, but the next highest thing on the list is missions from the Independent Magic Battalion. Aunt Maya’s authority ranks below that, in third.”

Tatsuya could feel Miyuki shift in a swoon, but he didn’t pay it any more attention. Even Minami, focused on his words as she was, didn’t direct that cold gaze on Miyuki for her brother complex.

“Until now, though, whenever she’s given me *work*, she’s always phrased it in the form of a command. Maybe she somehow knows when I’m not currently on a mission, but in any case, that was what she normally did.”

Then Tatsuya reached for his teacup. Maybe he’d gotten thirsty from talking, and maybe he was summarizing his thoughts as he drank the black tea—his motions as he returned the cup to its saucer were a little slower than usual.

“If she’s doing this in a way that’s not normal, then the circumstances must not be normal, either. For example, maybe this mission needs some kind of special treatment.”

Understanding appeared on Minami’s face, but unease showed on Miyuki’s. “Then this mission might be especially dangerous?”

“Our foe has gravely wounded the head of the Kuroba family and still evades the Yotsuba’s pursuit. Whether we need to capture him or kill him, it certainly

won't be easy."

As Tatsuya answered, he gently stroked his sister's hair reassuringly. Sensing that he didn't think this would be too dangerous a mission, Miyuki regained her composure.

"The issue isn't the difficulty of the mission itself."

But as Tatsuya removed his hand and spoke, tension returned to both Miyuki's and Minami's faces.

"I've never been in a situation where I didn't know the target's location, and you could say it's rare for the Yotsuba in general. I mean, as far as I knew, *nobody* had the skills needed to slip away from the family."

Tatsuya sighed, thinking about how difficult this job would be.

"That's the situation—and that's the guy we're after. This is clearly going to be a long, drawn-out mission."

The expression on Miyuki's face changed from tension to unease to loneliness. Seeing that, Tatsuya rather quickly added, "Not that I'll be gone from the house for an extended period. We still have school, and I don't know how to conduct searches anyway. To find him, I'll have to call on others. I'll probably only be at bat once they find him."

"...Will it come to fighting?"

"Ah, Miyuki, don't look like that. It's not like I'll be facing the target alone. I'm sure the role they want me to fill is to block his escape route."

As Tatsuya spoke, he pointed to his own eyes. Understanding what he meant, Miyuki breathed a sigh of relief.

"But at times, there may be quite a few days when I do need to leave the house." He pretended not to see Miyuki give him a moping, *that's-not-what-you-said* stare. "When I do, Minami, you have to protect Miyuki."

Minami hadn't really understood why they'd made her sit in on this. Because of that, up until this point, she'd only been following along with what Tatsuya was saying, all the while feeling like it wasn't her business.

"Yes, sir!"

In a certain way, this was like a surprise attack. When Tatsuya reaffirmed her mission as a Guardian, Minami unintentionally straightened more than necessary and answered so loudly that it was almost a shout.

Tatsuya didn't even give a chagrined smile at her overly enthusiastic reply. "In terms of magic power, Miyuki is stronger than you, Minami. If we assume you'll be in combat, she would have more useful spells. But that doesn't matter."

"...Yes, sir." This time, she gave a steady answer, responding to the seriousness in Tatsuya's voice.

"To the Yotsuba family, you are Miyuki's Guardian. But more importantly, to me, you are one of the few magicians in whom I can place my trust."

Tatsuya's voice was dark and grave. The one who'd sent Minami here had been Maya. He knew she had an ulterior motive in doing so, and he was pretty sure Minami knew that, too. But he still trusted her. He'd made that decision based on what he had seen with his own eyes and deemed her trustworthy.

"While I'm gone, Miyuki will be in your hands."

"Yes. I will not let you down."

Minami didn't intend on averting her eyes from that trust.



The Kuroba "family," due to the nature of its "work," frequently went on "business trips." Because of this, they had hotels they regularly used all over Japan. In major cities, they had hotels prepared for them through the Yotsuba influence, or even more directly, funded by the Yotsuba. The hotel Fumiya and Ayako were staying in this time was one of the establishments under the Yotsuba umbrella.

This meant they could call the main Yotsuba residence from these places without worrying about wiretapping.

"We've delivered the family head's letter to Tatsuya. We also have a message from him."

Fumiya was reporting today's results to the Yotsuba main residence.

"What did Tatsuya say?"

The number he'd called was the direct line for Maya, but she rarely answered the phone, so he was talking to Hayama instead. He didn't mind reporting the outcome of the job ordered of him by the head to her butler Hayama—he was easier to talk to.

“He said he understands and accepts.”

“Anything else? Did he not make mention of whether he would be censured should he not accept the mistress's request?”

“No, nothing like that at all.”

“I see. Fumiya, Ayako, excellent work. I will contact Tatsuya regarding more detailed future arrangements.”

“All right. Thank you.”

On the screen, Hayama gave a polite bow. That meant the conversation was over. Fumiya bowed as well, then hung up.

“I suppose that means our mission is done. It really was just delivering a message this time.”

Ayako, who had been listening to the conversation, spoke in a drained voice to her brother, who had heaved a sigh after finishing his report. If you took those words at surface value, they may have sounded like a complaint for an unresisting mission, but if you looked at her expression, you'd know she actually welcomed the fact that it had ended so simply.

“And it's still only six?” Ayako continued. “We have more than enough time to go home. What do you want to do?”

After sitting down, Fumiya shook his head. “No, let's stay here for the night. The family went through the trouble of arranging this extravagant three-room suite for us.”

“Extravagant... If you keep saying such lower-middle class things, you won't even be able to stand in for Father, much less represent Lady Maya.”

After mildly reproaching her little brother for his banter, Ayako realized his “banter” contained an uncharacteristically sarcastic venom.

“Fumiya, are you not happy with this job?” she asked, tone turning serious.

“Not the mission itself, exactly,” Fumiya said, albeit with an expression that stated he did, in fact, have a complaint *related* to the mission. “I mean, I get that being the messenger is an important job in its own right, and I know I’m the right choice for delivering Lady Maya’s messages to him. But...”

“You don’t like the delivery condition she gave you, do you?” said Ayako, gently filling in his evasive answer.

“Well, of course not!” Her sisterly tone caused Fumiya to release the emotions he’d been keeping down. “Don’t do anything about the tail? Don’t try to shake them off? What’s that all about?!”

That was the condition—or rather, the restriction—imposed on Fumiya for this mission.

At first, when Maya had personally ordered him to deliver the sealed letter to Tatsuya, he’d had no complaints about being used as an errand boy. In fact, he’d been elated. Part of it was simply that he’d have a chance to see Tatsuya, but he was also satisfied at being entrusted with the intermediary role of delivering the *request* to Tatsuya, with whom Maya had what could not be called a very friendly relationship (at least on the surface).

After Maya had left, however, the butler Hanabishi—second in the Yotsuba family’s servant hierarchy, in charge of various arrangements that came with externally sourced work—had informed him of the points of caution relating to the assignment. When he’d heard them, Fumiya had felt like someone had dumped cold water over him. Not that he wasn’t happy about getting to see Tatsuya anymore—what burdened him wasn’t disappointment but apprehension.

“We *know* we were being tailed, but we weren’t allowed to do anything about it?! And because of that, we’ve helplessly led who even *knows* right to where Tatsuya and Miyuki live!”

“It’s all right, Fumiya. Nobody could ever expose the link between Tatsuya and the Yotsuba, no matter who it is. He might not be aware of it, but the more you look into his personal data, the more you’d conclude he wasn’t related to the family. That’s how thoroughly they manipulated it.”

Unfortunately, Ayako’s consoling words didn’t have much of an effect on

Fumiya at the moment.

“I wasn’t worried about any of that. At this point, anyone tailing us would obviously be a group trying to protect Gongjin Zhou.”

Ayako didn’t deny his conclusion by saying he was overthinking things. When he’d escaped Yokohama, Gongjin Zhou was aware his pursuers were Kurobas. And at the Nine School Competition last month, following orders from the main family, Fumiya and Ayako had made an especially conspicuous display of being Kurobas.

“We’re already bothering Tatsuya with the Kuroba’s failure—but now, because we *allowed* someone to tail us, they might end up in the crosshairs. How can I look Tatsuya in the face after this?” lamented Fumiya, looking down, voice pained.

Ayako came to stand in front of her younger brother. “Fumiya.”

“Wha—*mrgh*?!”

As Fumiya looked up, Ayako tugged out his cheeks.

“What did you do that for?!”

Fumiya quickly brushed his older sister’s hands away, and Ayako realized she’d been fairly brutal in her pulling and that his cheeks had gotten red. Seeing her little brother’s teary-eyed objections made Ayako give a momentary, truly amused-looking sadistic grin, but she immediately swapped it for a contrived smile to smooth it over.

“Ayako?” He sounded highly dubious.

“You need to lose some of that tension, Fumiya,” she declared. “It would be one thing if we’d been tailed because of you making a mistake. But it was the family’s orders. You can’t help it, can you? This is nothing you need to feel responsible for. And even if Tatsuya was attacked, it would be fine. If someone did start poking their nose in his business, he’d be the one figuring out *their* identity, not the other way around.”

“Ayako...”

Sitting in a chair as he was, Fumiya gave an upturned glare at his sister. From

an outsider's perspective—loath though Fumiya himself may have been to admit it—the expression was nothing if not adorable, but Ayako reeled back, sensing an indescribable force behind it.

“What you're saying makes sense, I guess, but I *did* see how amused you just were.”

“Come...come now, Fumiya. Amusement? Never. Oh! If we're not going straight home, we should get our luggage in order.”

“We don't have any luggage to get 'in order.' We're only staying one night!”

“Anyway, I'll see you at dinner, Fumiya!”

“Huh? Hey, get back here!”

Those words needlessly hastened the escape of more than just thieves.

Ayako fled into her own room and locked the door before Fumiya could catch up.



It was a little over a month until this year's Thesis Competition. Yet it *still* was not the core of the First High student body conversation.

“Hope no crazy stuff happens like last year.”

“There's no way it'll happen. We don't even need to vote in the first place. Even if a rival candidate showed up, Shiba would still win by a landslide.”

“She's so great... I hope she gives a speech at an assembly soon... Damn it, if only her brother wasn't around!”

“You're dumb, you know that? She can't have a *boyfriend* because he's around. It's not like with celebrities—he'll never cheat on her. Can't find a better deal than that.”

That was what the junior guys were talking about, and...

“I wonder who Shiba will pick for council members.”

“I'd say you're jumping the gun...but you're not. It's a popularity contest every year. Nobody would be crazy enough to run against her, especially this year.”

“If the freshman Saegusa moves up to vice president, I wonder if Mitsui will

be the treasurer.”

“Huh? Wouldn’t Big Brother Shiba be moving up?”

“‘Big Brother’? You know he’s younger than you.”

“Well, yeah, but doesn’t he, like, really feel like a big brother?”

“In that case, you might as well call him *Brother* like she does. I could get used to having a ‘brother’ like him.”

“All right, all right. Wouldn’t that mean *Brother* would become the treasurer? But nobody else can keep her in check, right?”

“Ahhh, I hope nothing like last year happens...”

...that was what the senior girls were talking about. Other, similar conversations could be heard from all over the cafeteria. The First High students’ interest was currently on the student council elections happening at the end of this week.

Of course, it would be another popularity contest this year, doubtless without any competitors.

And this year, there wouldn’t be any major themes for the general student council assembly, either, like the rule changes regarding the right to be elected to council positions. The male students were generally talking about how wonderful Miyuki would look during the speech assembly she’d definitely be speaking in, and the female students were focused on who she’d choose for the new members.

“Hear that, Tatsuya? They’re calling you *Brother*.”

“It’s bad manners to eavesdrop, Erika.”

Their conversations also reached the table of one of the related parties, Tatsuya. Not only their voices, actually. Nobody was shameless enough to obviously stare at him, but his antenna *had* picked up several stolen glances since coming here.

The group he was currently sitting with had five people: Tatsuya, Erika, Leo, Mizuki, and Mikihiko. Had Miyuki joined them, everyone would have been staring, and it would have been a real nuisance, so she’d held back and taken

lunch in the student council room. Honoka and Shizuku had gone with her. It wasn't as though Honoka had chosen friendship over love, though. She was also trying her best to avoid a situation where everyone would wind up staring at her.

"Tatsuya, are you not gonna try to be president this year?"

"No. And it's not like I was in the running last year, either."

Leo's question was based on vote counts, and Tatsuya's answer reemphasized that the votes he got last year were invalid. Void votes had been submitted in droves last year, and that was a letdown not only for Miyuki, who had been given disgraceful and embarrassing nicknames, but for Tatsuya as well.

"Well, I doubt anything like last year is going to happen again this year," said Erika to intercede, maybe thinking it would be bad to get Tatsuya too worked up.

"There's no way anyone's crazy enough to interrupt Miyuki's speech," said Mikihiko, expressing his agreement in a profound tone.

"By the way, Tatsuya, who is Miyuki going to choose as the new members?"

The other three perked up at Mizuki's question—and so did all the tables around them.

"Haven't heard. We don't talk much about that stuff at home."

Tatsuya could feel waves of disappointment from several directions at his answer.

"Like I said, nothing has been decided yet. Please don't rush me like that when the elections aren't even over."

Around the same time in the student council room, Miyuki was asked the same thing, and her answer was a frustrated one.

"Honoka, Miyuki's not going to budge an inch at this point. You should give up."

"Yeah... Sorry, Miyuki. I was being annoying."

Thankfully, her good friend chiding her made Honoka, who'd already been

faltering under Miyuki's aura of displeasure, quickly hold up the white flag.

"...I was being a little harsh, too. I'm sorry, Honoka. I should perfectly understand why you're concerned with where my brother will be moving," Miyuki said as she cast a glance behind Honoka.

Following her gaze, Honoka turned around.

Pixie was there, having finished preparing their after-lunch tea.

"Urgh."

Honoka's face drew back. Shizuku lightly patted her shoulder.

When Honoka turned back around, Shizuku shook her head. "Too late for that, Honoka."

Honoka hung her head in disappointment.

Azusa, Isori, and Kanon watched warmly, smiling painfully at the girl.

Izumi and Kasumi exchanged confused glances.

"Huh? Isn't that Minami over there?"

"Oh, you're right."

As Mizuki and Erika made mystified faces, Tatsuya put a little astonishment into his voice. "Minami comes to the cafeteria with her own classmates sometimes, you know."

She must have noticed them watching. Turning around with her tray in her hands, at the tail end of a group of (probably) classmates, Minami gave a bow. Tatsuya looked back to his two female friends.

"Yeah, guess so."

"Yes, right."

The two of them began to laugh a little, insincerely, before Erika tried to force through a change of topic. "By the way, Tatsuya, why aren't you in the Thesis Competition?"

Tatsuya wasn't exactly ignorant of their "expectations," but Minami wasn't a topic he would stubbornly stick to for a long time. He *happily* answered Erika's

question.

“No particular reason. I just didn’t make it in time.”

“Wait, what’s that mean?”

Mikihiko was probably the one with the most interest in this subject. He openly doubted Tatsuya’s answer, which meant he’d probably been listening in.

“It means just what it sounds like. Why...?”

Tatsuya tried to wrap things up with just that, but with all five people around him seeming to demand an explanation with their eyes, he changed course with good grace.

“After the stellar reactor experiment, I have a research theme I’ve been working on independently, but it’s not at a stage where I can present it yet.”

“Huh... Must be a pretty advanced topic, then,” said Leo, nodding deeply and letting out a leading sigh.

“I guess,” Tatsuya replied. “As for what it is—that’s a secret.”

He couldn’t possibly tell them he was developing combat magic utilizing FAE theory.

“Whaaat?” complained Erika, naturally.

“Erika, you shouldn’t push him,” Mizuki cut in.

“If he’s keeping it a secret, he must have a good reason for it,” Mikihiko added to both Erika and Leo. “Besides, even when he told us the magic theory behind something on the level of a stellar reactor, it wasn’t enough to sate our curiosity.”

Essentially, he was saying that even if Tatsuya gave a detailed explanation, they probably wouldn’t understand it anyway. But in terms of just intelligence, these two were no pushovers. Still, that was why neither Erika nor Leo argued against the idea; they understood, because they weren’t stupid, that acting strange and persisting would come back to bite them.

“By the way, Tatsuya, did they not ask you to be support?”

“Not yet anyway.”

“Kei is the leader this year, right? I thought you two were friends.”

“I’d obviously help if he asked, but I don’t think it’ll be my place this year.”

Rather than smiling and nodding (and lying), Tatsuya answered Erika honestly.

“Really? Why?” Mizuki wondered as well, tilting her head in confusion.

“Because they’re having it in Kyoto this year.”

“The Thesis Competition alternates between Yokohama and Kyoto,” Mikihiko explained for the group. “They have different judging tendencies. When it’s in Yokohama, they rate practical topics more highly, but in Kyoto, I hear they like purely theoretical themes better.”

Tatsuya nodded in agreement. “When it’s held in Kyoto, presentations about fundamental issues of magic, like the Cardinal Code hypothesis, tend to be ranked higher than ones about magic-using power systems and magic program development and activation sequence improvement for them.”

Finally looking convinced, Leo nodded several times. “So from your point of view, you wouldn’t be able to show off what you’re good at.”

“I feel like you’re still beyond high school level when it comes to purely theoretical fields, too...” Mizuki offered hesitantly, not seeming to buy it.

“Hmm. Maybe that makes it even harder for him.”

Rather than answering Mizuki, Erika simply said what came to mind.

“?”

“I doubt Kei would sulk or get jealous, but since their methods are totally different, it would probably be a real struggle just to reconcile them.”

“They’re that different?”

“Look—Kei’s the one who engraves seals on my CAD, right? I can kinda tell just because Tatsuya does maintenance on it sometimes. They’re helping the same spells, but their approaches are way different.”

“Oh... Right. Seal-based assistance is close to our ancient-style talisman arts.”

As his friends were saying whatever they wanted, leaving the central figure out, the bell for afternoon classes chimed.



Seven thirty PM. Usually a time when everyone would still be around the table after dinner. Today, though, as the virtual clock's hands pointed to 7:25, Tatsuya withdrew into his room. And right now, using a voice-only telephone with enhanced security, he was calling a woman at her private number.

"Hello? Tatsuya? It's Fujibayashi."

This telephone diverted all of the resources that it would have used on image processing on a normal videophone to encryption, and it processed the high-load encoding with a speed that wouldn't hamper their conversation.

"This is Shiba, ma'am. I apologize for calling so late."

The reason he'd cut his standard evening time with Miyuki short was that he'd arranged to call Fujibayashi in advance.

"It's rare for you to be the one to contact me. Anything wrong? Did something suddenly come up?"

"Something that suddenly requires promptness. Something with more importance than time."

The meaningfully roundabout expression created a short pause.

"...For some reason, I don't really want to know anymore."

"I wouldn't want to say this if I didn't have to, either, ma'am."

"..."

Fujibayashi used her silence to urge Tatsuya to continue. Still, it was doubtless that tonight, at least, Tatsuya's tongue would not be affected by how Fujibayashi reacted.

"I'd like to request General Kudou's assistance."

Despite telling her he didn't want to say this, he spoke his request with perfect fluidity.

"...You want my grandfather's help?"

"Yes, ma'am. I don't make this request to Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi, aide to the Independent Magic Battalion, but to the daughter of the Fujibayashi

family and granddaughter of General Kudou. I'd like you to prepare a location for a personal meeting with the general."

"Personal—related to your 'work' with the Yotsuba, I assume?"

This time, Tatsuya used his own silence to answer.

"I suppose I don't have the option of refusing. Not after what happened last month."

"I suppose not."

Fujibayashi was taken aback and nearly let that fact slip into her voice. She'd been the one to suggest it, but she hadn't thought he'd unabashedly admit this request for cooperation was also calling in a favor.

She'd need a few seconds before she said her next words.

Tatsuya was the one who restarted the conversation. "I don't mean to make an impossible request, ma'am. In fact, I believe the general will gladly lend me his aid."

"May I ask what this 'job' entails?"

"It's to root out and capture an immortalist who escaped from Yokohama Chinatown."

"...Ah. In that case, I can see why the Yotsuba would want to borrow my grandfather."

He could sense through the telephone that Fujibayashi's tension had calmed.

"You seem to know that the Yotsuba are struggling."

The Yotsuba weren't the ones trying to get Retsu Kudou's help—it was Tatsuya personally. But he didn't clarify Fujibayashi's misunderstanding. The conversation seemed about to wrap up in his favor, and he didn't want to give her needless information that might confuse the situation.

"The JDF is struggling, too, to tell the truth. If you're going to take him on, Lieutenant Fujibayashi would greatly welcome it."

Purposely referring to herself in third person was to get Tatsuya back a little for his earlier line. Still, for Tatsuya, this trifling wordplay didn't even sting.

Fujibayashi had probably realized it had had no effect as well. She cleared her throat in an effort to eliminate the awkwardness in the air. And then, tone purposefully businesslike, she answered the young man's request.

"All right. I'll inquire as to my grandfather's schedule. Should I reply by e-mail?"

"Go ahead. For the encryption, please use the Independent Magic Battalion's."

Tatsuya had only said this because of security considerations. But Fujibayashi grew suspicious—thinking that he was taking a dig at her over the blank-sender e-mail from the month before last.

"...Right," Fujibayashi said, curtly hanging up, her attitude leaving Tatsuya wondering what on earth he'd said to offend her.

Feeling thirsty after his phone call, Tatsuya headed to the dining room. There, he found his sister drinking black tea by herself.

"Brother, would you like a drink?" she asked, quickly standing from her seat in front of the dining table.

"Yeah, I'm a little thirsty," he answered honestly. He avoided asking after Minami; whether she was studying, cleaning, or bathing, it took only one look to know she wasn't there, and it wasn't like he needed anything from her.

"I'll prepare something right away."

Tatsuya would have been fine with water, but he didn't voice an objection to the offer. He knew she liked taking care of him, and placing himself in her hands didn't make him unhappy, at least. Just the opposite, in fact, so he had no reason to refuse.

"Please wait for a moment in the living room."

Tatsuya, following his sister's request, moved into the living room.

A little under five minutes of waiting on the sofa later, Miyuki appeared from the dining room, carrying two glasses of iced milk tea on a tray. He thought she'd just been drinking hot tea; she must have remade it, including enough for herself.

Miyuki placed the coasters and glasses on the sofa set's glass coffee table without making so much as a *tink*. One in front of Tatsuya and one next to it... then Miyuki, as though it were her natural right—and doubtless she considered it such—took the seat next to him.

Tatsuya was sitting on a one-seater sofa, so today they couldn't nestle up against each other. Miyuki, however, didn't seem to find this disheartening. Giving a subtle smile, she put her mouth to the straw of her well-cooled iced milk tea at the same time her brother did to his.

Miyuki was the first one to remove her lips from the straw. Returning the glass to the table, once again with nary a sound, she shifted on the sofa and gazed at the side of her brother's face.

Tatsuya noticed the gaze immediately. He put down the glass with a soft *plink*, after which he met her eyes.

"Your phone call earlier—it had to do with what we were talking about yesterday, didn't it?"

When Tatsuya had withdrawn to his room, he'd told her his goal—to make a phone call—but he hadn't said who he'd be calling or what for. But Miyuki seemed to have caught on. After yesterday, maybe the deduction wasn't that difficult. Still, he was impressed that she knew.

"That's right."

"May I ask who it was you were calling?"

He wavered for a moment but, in the end, decided to answer honestly. "Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi."

"...Brother, did you commission the Independent Magic Battalion's assistance?" Miyuki wondered gently. Tatsuya shared her concern: of whether it was all right to allow the military's intervention into Yotsuba affairs. But that was why he'd called Fujibayashi and not Kazama.

"No, what I asked *Ms.* Fujibayashi was if she could act as a go-between for me and General Kudou."

"But is that not dangerous? Aren't your communications with the unit

censored?”

In this age, even soldiers were guaranteed freedom of private communication. Nevertheless, the technology to exchange highly compressed, ultrasonic wave data using a voice telephone device had been established over fifty years ago. To handle this, the phones set up in crucial facilities had censoring features on them to prevent information leakage. It was said this was for automatically cutting out all sound waves excluding those in audible range, but there *had* still been hardware inserted between the sender and the receiver that checked the sound waves passing through; you couldn't deny suspicions that other functions had been added to them. Tatsuya, too, had been cautious and considerate of that point.

“It should be fine. I called the lieutenant's private number. I doubt even Echelon III could eavesdrop on a line the Electron Sorceress used personally. Nothing to worry about,” he explained.

However, that was a careless remark that showed he hadn't learned from the past:

“...Oh. Ms. Fujibayashi's private number. I see.”

By the time he'd realized his mistake, it was too late. He just now remembered having struggled to pacify his sister after something similar had bent her out of shape last April.

“By the way, Brother, however did you acquire such a thing?”

Miyuki's tone and expression both were exact replicas of the broadcasting room shut-in incident that had preceded the Blanche attacks. At the time, the tumult was already at their doorstep, so he'd managed to leave things unsettled, but...

How am I going to explain this?

Frankly speaking, Tatsuya didn't have a single thing to be guilty about. It wasn't only Fujibayashi—he knew Kazama's private number, and Sanada's, and Yamanaka's, too. But he doubted Miyuki would be seriously convinced if he revealed that. She might pretend she was, but it would be sure to drag on behind her in her mind.

And so Tatsuya decided:

Persuading her would not come easily today.



As Tatsuya predicted, Miyuki's mood was not easily mended. Nevertheless, she would never take it out on him or ignore him or anything like that; from a more worldly perspective, it didn't even turn into anything that could be termed a sibling quarrel. Objectively speaking, Miyuki was simply sulking a little, but even so, Tatsuya exerted his utmost to "repairing his relationship" with his sister, and by Wednesday, two days later, they'd entirely reverted to the *friendly* siblings they always were.

And the current date was Friday, September 28. On this night, with student council elections finally coming tomorrow, a phone call from Fujibayashi came to Tatsuya's house.



“Ms. Fujibayashi. Is it all right to use this number?”

Tatsuya referred to her this way because she was wearing plain clothes: a frilled autumn blouse and a country-style long skirt. And his question was because the number she'd called was not assigned to the telephone with increased security he had in his room, instead connecting to their normal videophone.

“Nobody’s listening in at the moment. A shame—if they were, we could trace them.”

But apparently, she'd done it on purpose.

“Anyway, even if they do eavesdrop, we’ll be fine. I’m routing this through three layers of dummy signals.”

She spoke as though it didn't matter, but because he was well versed in mechanical engineering in his own right, it drew a sigh out of Tatsuya rather than admiration.

“...How in the world are you able to do things meant for exclusive military use on public systems?”

But this was a misunderstanding.

“Because I’m not only doing it with physical tech.”

Right, thought Tatsuya. The Electron Sorceress seemed to be applying her secret techniques. Given time and the use of his “vision,” he might have been able to figure out how she was doing it. But he wasn't much interested in skills he couldn't personally reproduce.

“It’s still hard for me to maintain things like this for very long, though, so let me make this brief. My grandfather says he’ll meet with you.”

The answer Fujibayashi gave could be called, for the moment, good news for Tatsuya.

“Saturday, October 6, 1800 hours, at the main Kudou family estate in Ikoma. Can you fit that in?”

Tatsuya called up his plans in his mind and confirmed his schedule for that day

was open. “That will be fine. And I know where it is.”

“Right.” Fujibayashi offered a mean grin. *“He was happy when he heard you wanted to meet with him, Tatsuya.”*

“Is this the part where I say ‘it’s an honor’?” Tatsuya murmured, erasing his expression.

Fujibayashi gave a chuckle. *“Judging by your face, you’re not too thrilled by this honor. Sadly, you’ll have to accept. That’s how it goes when you ask him for help.”*

“You mean I should be grateful just for not getting turned away at the front door.”

“Pretty much. You should prepare yourself, Tatsuya. With this, you’ll be jumping right into the very heart of that which fetters and binds Japan’s magical world.”

Fujibayashi’s advice came with a smile but also eyes of warning; Tatsuya took it calmly. “I’ve long since prepared myself for that much, at least.”

“Very good. I’ll be present that day as well.”

“I see—thank you.”

As Tatsuya gave a slight bow, the screen showing Fujibayashi’s smiling face blacked out.

Tatsuya had been taking that call in the living room. Though they weren’t quite participating in it, both Miyuki and Minami had listened to the conversation between him and Fujibayashi, and Fujibayashi hadn’t reprimanded him for it.

“Brother... Is this truly the right thing?”

Once Tatsuya was finished with the call, Miyuki spoke to him in a voice of worry. When he checked, Minami was giving him a look of sympathy as well... It was sympathy, rather than unease, because she properly understood what it meant to have a connection to the Old Master.

“About contacting Retsu Kudou? There’s no point worrying about that.”

Tatsuya smiled and picked up his glass of iced tea. But it was warm now, since his phone call had gone on longer than he'd thought, so he returned it to the table without drinking.

A thin mist began to swirl inside the glass. Because only the temperature of the glass's contents were lowered, rather than the glass itself, the air touching the iced tea had condensed in midair.

It went without saying that it was Miyuki's spell. The near-room-temperature black tea turned back into iced tea without cooling too much and certainly without freezing over. Tatsuya offered a smile and wordlessly gave her thanks; she blushed and looked down, also without a word.

After wetting his throat with the nice and cool straight tea, Tatsuya continued the answer to her question.

"Retsu Kudou is interested in me outside of this job. And it's more than just a passing interest in a fascinating young person, too. He probably knows of my identity and my magic."

Miyuki's eyes widened. The latter part of her brother's remarks seemed to have come as a considerable surprise. Another manifestation of the ill effects of thinking the Yotsuba were overly special, but Tatsuya didn't particularly feel the need to chide her about it. For now, he wanted her to be cautious about only the Yotsuba. As long as Tatsuya didn't neglect his own caution toward the Ten Master Clans and other magician groups, she'd be fine.

"Retsu Kudou was close with the head of the Yotsuba before the previous one, and I hear with that connection, he was a private tutor to Miya and Maya Yotsuba."

"The one before last... Our grandfather, then?"

"Yeah. The central figure in *that incident*, which made the Yotsuba's *notoriety* known throughout the world."

For some reason, Miyuki smiled a little. When Tatsuya looked slightly confused, she giggled even more cutely. "...I'm sorry. You talk as though none of it is your business, Brother."

Tatsuya frowned dubiously. "What do you mean?"

“Brother, if the world knew what really happened on the Scorching Halloween, it would be far worse than what the family head before last did.”

For an instant, a subtle expression came to his face, one somewhat different from utter impassivity, as though he’d mistaken the cold tea for vegetable juice.

“...In any case, because of all that, it’s not strange that he would know a lot about me.”

“Is it...all right?” asked Miyuki, stammering and nervous. No matter how few ears were around to hear, a sixteen-year-old girl would not want to ask if it was okay that they didn’t *silence* him.

“Not shutting him up, you mean?”

Tatsuya, however, had no hesitation putting it into words.

“He was once called the world’s trickiest. Even if we wanted to silence him, we’d have a very hard time doing so. And we probably don’t need to anyway. This may sound weird coming from me, but we’re talking about the personal data of a strategic-class magician. Retsu Kudou would obviously understand the necessity of keeping that a secret.”

For some time, Tatsuya had been referring to Retsu Kudou by his name, rather than “the Old Master” or “General.” He’d done it several times already, so it was probably an intentional act. He’d only do it when nobody was around to see or hear, but it was an expression of his refusal to pay the man any respect. He seemed to consider Retsu Kudou as someone unlikeable after the Parasidoll experiment.

Even still, Tatsuya rated his intelligence and abilities highly. He asserted they didn’t need to silence him because he’d judged the old man would understand the merits of keeping the joker that was Tatsuya Shiba in his hand.

“Also, it would be troublesome if we stayed enemies with him. For the future, I think we should try to even things out.”

“Can we trust him?”

“Allies don’t always need to be trustworthy. The important thing is that they’ll act as we instruct them when the time comes. I don’t mind having to pay a

modest price for it.”

Minami had no idea what the siblings were talking about. But she didn’t try to ask her female master or that master’s older brother about it. At present, she was observing a rule she’d been taught: that a maid working in the house of one she served should never be needlessly curious.



Saturday, September 29. This year, both the student council general assembly and student council elections ended without any trouble. To prevent invalid votes like last year, the election ceremony had adopted a system of giving students one-time-use, close-range wireless cards upon entering the hall, which they would then use to vote while they were seated. Like every year, there was only one nominee, so the cards had been prepared with two buttons: confidence and no confidence. With a firm push of a round symbol, their vote would be sent to the tabulator.

The electronic signals would send only once. That was why they were one-time use. The cards were a development of electronic tags, and though they were cheap, they were still more expensive than paper. Some, of course, weren't sure a mere high school election needed to spend that much. But a company under the Kitayama family empire solved the cost issue, and so they'd gone with this method. In so doing, Shizuku's family was steadily entrenching themselves in First High and other magical industrial and academic fields that had lagged behind in certain societal advancements.

Leaving aside such adult matters, as a result of the new form of electronic voting granting students instant vote-casting abilities, Miyuki, with an incredible 100 percent vote of confidence, became the student council president. Nobody had even considered voting no confidence as a joke—either out of adoration or out of fear... Both seemed possible, and it was hard to tell which it was.

“Anyway, to Miyuki getting elected student council president! Cheers!”

With Erika taking the lead, soft drink glasses were lifted high. The chorus of *Cheers* came from Miyuki's family, friends, and underclassmen gathered in Einebrise—specifically Tatsuya, Leo, Mizuki, Mikihiko, Honoka, Shizuku, Minami,

Izumi, Kasumi, and Kento. Kasumi had very little personal connection with Tatsuya's group, but today she'd been dragged here against her will by Izumi.

"Well, I guess it was pretty much bound to happen."

Nobody argued the remark Erika made right after the toast ended.

"But of course! Anyone other than her being First High student council president would be unthinkable! She has the ability worthy of being the representative of our school! The talent! The beauty! The gracefulness of demeanor! This result is none other than grace from the heavens!"

In exchange for nobody objecting, one underclassman grew very excited.

"You...think so?"

And Miyuki, whom she had closed in on, was very much backing away in her seat. Kasumi seemed to be ignoring her younger twin sister's madness as hopeless as she sipped her drink aloofly.

"Miyuki, have you decided on your cabinet members?"

The one who bravely, or rather, in total disregard for Izumi, asked that question when everyone else—including even Tatsuya—hesitated to say anything, was Shizuku.

At her words, Izumi directed an even more passionate gaze at the local ice princess. Honoka seemed like she was on the edge of her seat, too, but her eyes were darting between Miyuki and Tatsuya.

Miyuki could feel their gazes, but she decided not to look at them—especially Izumi—and answered Shizuku's question.

"I'm thinking of asking Izumi to be vice president."

Izumi let out a cheer that was pretty much a shriek. Finally embarrassed, though, Kasumi broke her earlier show of indifference and covered Izumi's mouth.

"I'm having trouble deciding on the others, though. I would like Honoka to help as well..." she said, glancing not at Honoka but at Tatsuya.

Perhaps sensing Miyuki's hesitation, not only Shizuku but Honoka as well

refrained from asking the same question again.

Despite certain overly excited female students, from a broader perspective, the party ended peacefully, respecting the shop's atmosphere. And due to it being Saturday, the sun hadn't gone down yet by the time they'd left. Still, once Tatsuya and the others arrived back at their house, the western sky had changed from madder red to a deeper indigo.

The food they'd ordered at Einebrise had been light fare, but they'd eaten quite a bit of it. Given that tomorrow was Sunday, Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami all decided to forgo dinner tonight.

There was a short kerfuffle between Miyuki and Minami as to who would make the tea, but Tatsuya gave the final word, saying they were celebrating Miyuki today. That brought her out of the kitchen and back into the living room; as if to make up for it, she led him to the three-seater and sat next to him at point-blank range.

When Minami entered the living room holding a tray and saw the two of them, her eyebrow twitched. Still, without saying anything and without making any more of an expression than that, she placed milk tea in front of Miyuki and coffee in front of Tatsuya, then stood next to the table.

Today, even Tatsuya didn't tell her to sit down. In fact, he planned to release her from her chores, too, and let her go back to her room. But Miyuki apparently had something to talk to her about, and before she picked up her teacup, she spoke to her.

"Minami?"

"Yes, Big Sister Miyuki?"

"To tell you the truth, I'd like to have you in the student council as secretary."

There was no conspicuous change in Minami's face, but she tightened up, tensing. It didn't take Tatsuya long to realize she did so to hold in her shock.

"...All right," she answered very shortly, her voice not modest but stiff.

In truth, she probably felt opposed to joining the student council. But considering her mission as Guardian, she understood it would be useful in

various ways to belong to it. The noncommittal response was an expression of that mental conflict.

“I see. You’d also be freed from the CAD carry restriction. You should probably become a student council member.”

“That’s right, Brother.”

Tatsuya supported Miyuki’s proposal, and Miyuki happily closed what little space was left between them.

Seeing her sibling masters going very close to zero distance, Minami realized that it wasn’t going to matter *what* she said.

Though Tatsuya may have begrudged it—and Miyuki the more so—the siblings’ day would not end after only a peaceful conversation like this. Once teatime was finished, Tatsuya used the same telephone from before in his room to make a call. The number he dialed was a direct line to the head of the Yotsuba. But Maya didn’t answer it.

“Mr. Tatsuya, I’m terribly sorry, but the mistress is currently indisposed.”

A surly explanation from Hayama. *Seems like she’s pretending to be out*, Tatsuya thought.

But that didn’t offend him. His business tonight was not something he needed to convey to Maya directly. It was enough to have an alibi—the truth—that he’d informed her in advance. If he could leave his message with Hayama, he could actually achieve his objective more smoothly than if he’d been talking to Maya.

“Then I’d like to inform her regarding the mission I received the other day.”

“I will hear it,” said Hayama, immediately nodding as though he’d predicted the request.

“I’d like to ask for the Kudou family’s help in searching for the target. I’ve already contacted the Fujibayashi family and made an appointment to meet with the previous Kudou head.”

“Oh...”

He couldn’t tell just from the voice whether Hayama was truly surprised or if he was just feigning it. Although, he wasn’t sure he was ever able to tell even

when looking directly at the man's face, either.

"You've decided to ask for General Kudou's help rather than request assistance from the Independent Magic Battalion?"

"Wherever the original request came from, I decided it was better to avoid indebting myself to the JDF on a Yotsuba job."

"And that you would indebt yourself to the Kudou?"

"It's highly likely this Zhou person is allied with the Traditionalists, right? If he is, it's a good idea to borrow the Nines' help—they've been opposed to the Traditionalists for a long time. And the Kudou have a *personal* favor to pay back to me from the incident last month. Whether we owe them or they owe us, if things go on for too long, we'll be stuck in a relationship. I thought it would be best to settle accounts before that happened."

He heard Hayama's jolly laughter through the receiver. He must have seriously thought it was funny. *I wasn't trying to amuse the crowd, here*, thought Tatsuya in a wet-blanket way as he waited for Hayama to reply.

"You're so young, Mr. Tatsuya, but you understand the subtleties of society quite well."

Perhaps a benefit of his age, Hayama immediately recovered from his outburst of laughter. Still, though, he wasn't trying to hide how amused he was.

"You're right. Asking for the Kudou's aid is a wise choice for several reasons. Very well, then. I'll make sure the mistress knows that."

"Thank you." Tatsuya bowed to the telephone, even though he knew he wasn't visible.

"You don't need to relay every condition for obtaining their assistance to us. The mistress has told me to leave matters in this affair up to your discretion, whether it's with the JDF or other Clans."

After dropping that huge bomb at the very end, the butler hung up.



Hayama, who had been talking to Tatsuya with the receiver on speaker mode, put down the phone and bowed deeply to the person on the other side of the

desk.

“Mistress, it is as you’ve heard.”

Tatsuya’s guess that Maya was pretending to be out had been correct. But even he hadn’t imagined she would be in the same room, listening in on him.

Maya had been holding her mouth shut painfully. It seemed she was having great trouble stifling laughter. Realizing, perhaps, at Hayama’s address that the call was over, she broke out laughing in a voice unbecoming a noblewoman.

Even faced with his mistress’s somewhat unrefined behavior, Hayama’s attitude remained modest. Not only did he not remonstrate her—his eyes, directed at Maya, didn’t even have a hint of criticism in them.

But then, maybe because she felt uncomfortable under his unimpressible gaze, Maya’s laughter soon faded out.

“I’m sorry, Hayama. Tatsuya just says the most adorable things. I couldn’t help myself.” Maya dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief to wipe up the tiny tears that had formed. And then her expression shifted into one of complete seriousness. “Who on earth taught that boy such twisted wisdom?” she wondered, still serious, tilting her head.

“I believe what Mr. Tatsuya said is not mistaken...” Hayama explained.

“In one aspect, he’s right. But it’s not normal.” Whether or not it was because her nephew had been surprisingly defended, Maya’s tone suddenly turned less interested.

“Normally, you would try to build bonds through owing and repaying favors.”

“Perhaps Mr. Tatsuya thought it unnecessary to have that bond.”

“He’s so young.”

Hayama offered nothing to those words. Still, sensing that he was critical of her banter, she decided to change the topic.

“By the way, how goes the search for Gongjin Zhou? Have you found any new leads?”

Despite the sudden conversational shift, Hayama’s answer was fluid. “No new

leads, Mistress. The last we saw of him was when we allowed him to escape after the small battle at the end of last month, next to Sanzen-in Temple in Kyoto.”

“That’s where the trail has gone dry, then,” she muttered bitterly. “I doubt a famous temple like Sanzen-in would accommodate foreign magicians trying to bring this nation harm... The Traditionalists must be working behind the scenes again.”

Banding together and transcending schools and styles for the protection of ancient magic traditions—it sounded good when you put it that way. In reality, however, even though the Traditionalists willingly participated in old Lab Nine, the organization of ancient magicians harbored misplaced resentment toward the families of the current Nine for the childish reason of not having been *given* their desired outcome. Now they engaged in indiscriminate, disorderly, harassing, hostile actions toward them. Maya hated them in a different way than the families of the Nine: for their infantile mentality.

“Mistress, should we not relay this information to Mr. Tatsuya?”

“No need. We have Mitsugu doing an exhaustive search of the Oohara region, right? Besides, *he* wouldn’t stay very long in the same place.”

Hayama gave a wordless bow to his master’s remark.



Tatsuya’s life lately had fallen into a pattern: at night, real-time development (i.e. practice) of the new spell at Yakumo’s temple; sleep; early-morning training; and after that, school if it was a weekday or theoretical development of the new spell if it was a holiday.

Today, September 30, was a Sunday. Once again, after breakfast, he holed up in the basement laboratory and poured his efforts into resolving the points of issue with the new spell.

“...No problems in the baryon-extraction process. If dismantling was all I had to do, it would be easy—and I’ve gotten the speed and uniformity up to the required standards.”

Words murmured to himself, not accidentally but purposefully. Right now,

Tatsuya was in such a corner that he had to speak aloud like this to get his ideas in order.

“The movement-type spell that comes after it doesn’t have a problem, either. It’s essentially the same as gas movement. I could use Lorentz force like Lina, but considering FAE’s properties, it would be faster to move it directly with magic.”

Tatsuya heaved a sigh. In the end, this was his only conclusion:

“The key must be the mechanism for *finishing the activation* of the movement-type magic within a short enough time for FAE to have meaning.”

After using dismantling magic, he had to complete the movement-type magic in an extremely short period of time, before the laws of nature regained their compelling force. If he just had to output a magic program, he actually had an advantage over regular magicians because he had flash casting. But to complete the spell, he’d need influence. He’d never had any more influence than he needed for Dismantle and Regenerate—and that was the problem.

Feeling the need for a change in pace, and since it was lunchtime anyway, Tatsuya decided to go up to the first floor.

It wasn’t long after he finished climbing the stairs that he sensed the abnormality. The presence of something inhuman looking at the inside of the house.

A compound form? No, a synthetic spirit?

Synthetic spirit was the modern magic name referring to *certain kinds* of *shiki* (like *shikigami* or *shiki* demons). Spirits were psionic information bodies that lingered in the Idea even after their corresponding phenomenon had passed, becoming isolated. Synthetic spirits, then, were isolated information bodies brought forth and created by artificially inducing this spirit creation process, mainly with ancient magic techniques. However, not all *shiki*—isolated information bodies able to be employed toward a directed purpose—came about as a result of this method. In fact, it was more common to capture an isolated psionic information body possessing the core of a psionic information body that had occurred naturally, and then simply use that.

This isolated information body was stopped in midair, stuck to the lengthwise surface of the wall around the house. It was blocked by the same defensive spell used on First High's outer wall, seemingly unable to enter. Nevertheless...

No idea what kind of data that thing's gotten.

Tatsuya didn't believe he knew every magical technique under the sun. He couldn't ignore the chance that this *shiki* had functions he didn't know about and had searched the inside of the house from outside the defensive spell.

He set his eyes on the synthetic spirit again, through the house's walls, analyzing its structural information.

An isolated information body constructed only of psions...

If it had no psionic information body core, it was indeed a synthetic spirit. In which case, he could *dismantle it completely the same way he could with a magic program.*

Tatsuya reached out with his right hand toward the synthetic spirit. He held no CAD.

[Variable input: target synthetic spirit's structural information]

A process to construct a magic program, as a replacement for an activation sequence that would be output by a CAD, surged from the data sector in Tatsuya's magic-calculation region, then was sent into its execution sector.

[Magic program projection: Dismantle, activate]

An invisible flash of light burst out.

The synthetic spirit's structural information binding was completely split apart, and its psionic information body was reduced to a clump of chaotic psions, swallowed into the information dimension—the Idea.

As soon as he opened the living room door, Miyuki pressed him for answers.

"Brother, what was that just now?"

Her pressing, though, wasn't out of anger; the look on her face was one of concern.

"You saw that?" breathed Tatsuya in admiration.

Miyuki must have picked up on the fact that he'd used Dismantle. Being impressed with someone noticing magic he'd used was, in another light, a show of pride in believing his magic couldn't easily *be* noticed, but this was not conceit. In fact, Minami, who had followed after Miyuki, didn't seem to understand what they were talking about.

"I didn't perceive it clearly enough to say I *saw* it, but...I had a feeling you'd just used Dismantle."

"Yeah. A synthetic spirit was spying on the house," explained Tatsuya, nodding; he hadn't intended to tell her personally, but he also hadn't intended to hide it from her. "I think the job I took on the other day was the reason."

"You mean this was the doing of—Gongjin Zhou, was it?"

"It was probably one of his subordinates or someone trying to protect him," Tatsuya explained, giving an uncharacteristically obvious sigh. "They must have tailed Fumiya and Ayako."

Miyuki and Minami widened their eyes at that.

"Wait... I can't believe they would let that happen with Ayako there."

Miyuki's shock was founded in her belief that his guess was absolutely true, but Minami didn't look like she had room to doubt that, either.

"Probably on purpose."

"Ayako purposely led the enemy to our house?!"

Psions began to swirl around Miyuki, the symptom of a magical misfiring.

But Miyuki had matured, too. Before her unconscious magic could manifest, it was held in check by her will. Tatsuya watched as this happened, his eyes narrowed in approval.

"Not exactly, I think. What probably happened was that Ayako... Actually, both her and Fumiya were forbidden from throwing them off or contacting them in any way."

Miyuki didn't completely regain her calm upon hearing her brother's opinion, but she did get some of it back. "I suppose...we don't even need to think about who forbade them. But why in the world would she do such a thing?"

“We won’t know the truth unless we ask, but she might intend to use me as bait.”

“As *bait*?!”

Miyuki was naturally angry. Tatsuya smiled. “Miyuki, don’t be so mad. I just said we won’t know the truth unless we ask.”

“But...”

Miyuki was already in tunnel vision—anything other than that possibility was unthinkable. But Tatsuya didn’t chide her for that.

“And it’s a logical move to use me as bait. We’re up against someone strong enough to deal a major wound to Mitsugu Kuroba. We still don’t know everything he has up his sleeve, either. If you look at it tactically, she’s not mistaken to place me in the line of fire—I’d never *ultimately* be hurt. So don’t be upset,” he said, still smiling.

“Brother!”

But that answer, even more so than the stuff about being bait, was intolerable for Miyuki.

“Please do not speak in such self-neglecting tones! You must know it is not enough for you to simply *not die* or *not have any lasting wounds*!”

Her unexpected show of determination left no room for Tatsuya to make excuses.

“And above all, I beg you to consider how I would feel if I learned you were hurt even a *little* bit!”

“...Sorry,” managed Tatsuya in apology. “Minami, sorry for making you wait. Lunch is ready, isn’t it?” he asked her, trying to change the subject.

“Yes, Big Brother Tatsuya. Big Sister Miyuki, please come to the dining room as well.”

The fact that Minami didn’t consider doing anything like teasing Tatsuya even a little pointed to how she really was a good, honest person.



At the exact time Tatsuya dismantled the synthetic spirit, or *shikigami*...

“Whoa!”

In a small park about five hundred meters away from Tatsuya’s house, a man around thirty sitting on a bench suddenly cried out in surprise.

The man sitting next to him frantically looked around, left and right. The perception-blocking field he had up was working properly. Though he knew nobody would perceive them and that nobody would remember their voices, he still lowered his own and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“The *shikigami* was erased...”

“Erased? Not returned or stolen?”

The first man shook his head several times as if to say he didn’t understand. “I suddenly lost contact with it.”

“You mean the person in that house used a dispeller?”

“No! ...Well, I don’t know.” His bewilderment reaching a peak, the man gave a squeal before settling down somewhat. “I didn’t feel magic being used. You didn’t, either, did you?”

“Well, no, I suppose not...”

These two were the ancient magicians probing Tatsuya’s house, each with his own role. One of them controlled the *shikigami*, and the other ensured safety. In order to prevent any damage from a “rebound,” the one keeping watch had used a bounded-field spell and also had up a magical radar that would sense the initial signs of magic.

“But a *shikigami* would never vanish naturally without a spell to influence it, would it? And I doubt you’d mess up controlling it.”

“Of course not! But...”

Giving another perplexed look, the man shook his head, slightly downcast.

And then a shadow suddenly fell across the ground where his eyes were looking.

The two men let out a cry. Their shock was at the figure who had clearly

perceived them and approached, despite the one man having put up a field that would prevent anyone from coming close. But upon seeing the person clearly, the men's shock changed to caution and combativeness.

They were aware of the amicable relationship between the Shiba siblings and the Ninefold Temple. The name of its head priest, Yakumo Kokonoe, was like thunder in its fame, and it had been engraved upon their minds before they'd even undertaken this mission. They glanced at each other for a moment, then decided to run away rather than take the initiative.

The instant they began to rise, the monk standing in front of them rang a vajra bell, as though he'd been waiting for it.

The clear tone rang out *from three directions* around the pair.

Clearly taken aback, the man who'd been sitting on the right looked to his right, and the man who'd been sitting on the left looked to his left.

Two other monks, looking almost like twins to the one in front, were shaking vajra bells in the exact same way.

As the two men were getting up, the strength left their legs.

By the time they realized they were under a spell, the greater part of their consciousnesses had already faded.



Tatsuya, who had visited the Ninefold Temple again that night to use its underground training facility, was invited into a monk's room shortly after arriving. It was the room he'd used for discussion during the Parasidoll incident. As he took a seat, Yakumo began to speak without any preface.

"Seems you're wrapped up in another troublesome matter."

With just that, Tatsuya realized he was talking about the *shikigami* from earlier that day. "I'm sorry, Master. Did I make work for you?"

Now that he thought about it, a long-range search spell being used in the next town over, in what was basically their backyard, was not something Yakumo—or rather, his disciples—would sit back and allow to happen unopposed.

"I have quite a few hot-blooded disciples, you see," said Yakumo with a

pained grin, an indirect affirmation of Tatsuya's question. "What happened this time?"

Tatsuya vacillated over how he should answer or if he should even answer at all. But only for a brief moment. He decided to take the middle ground between answering and refusing to answer.

"I took on a job, and I think this trouble was related to it."

"A job? From Kazama?"

"No, not from the military."

Yakumo's eyes narrowed into a smile. And as they did, a strong light shone from them. "May I ask the details?"

"It will probably have me going to the Kyoto area. I'd like to settle things myself without bothering you with this, Master."

The corners of Yakumo's lips turned up more. His eyes softened, and his subtle smile become a real one. "You can speak your mind. I have something of a connection with the Traditionalists myself."

Tatsuya was surprised he would come out and mention them by name, but because of that, he was now sure the casters who had been probing his house had fallen into Yakumo's hands.

"So the ancient magician group that people call the Traditionalists was related to this after all?"

"They're not exactly called that—they just call *themselves* that. Though..."

Yakumo being a stickler on that point struck Tatsuya as amusing, but he refrained from letting it show. "All the more reason I can't ask for your help on this, Master. Infighting among ancient magicians would be no laughing matter."

Many among the nation's ancient magicians reacted to the moniker *Traditionalist* with more than displeasure. The ones calling themselves that in the first place hadn't exactly remained loyal to the traditional arts—they were the ones who had participated in old Lab Nine, seeking modern magic know-how. For spell casters who strictly adhered to tradition, seeing those opportunists calling themselves *traditional* seemed a shameless act. Many

casters involved with shadier work also belonged to the Traditionalists, so suggestions that the Traditionalists needed to be purged were certainly more than whispers among members of publicly known ancient magic groups.

“Well, well. It seems I’m still a long way from enlightenment.” Perhaps realizing that he’d been feeling uncharacteristically belligerent, Yakumo gave an embarrassed grin.

“By the way, you’re keeping the guys who were peeping on the house here, right? I have one or two things I’d like to ask them, if it’s okay.”

“I don’t think that would work right now.”

Yakumo’s answer to Tatsuya’s question came with a smile that would freeze the pit of your stomach.

“They’re a *little* tired at the moment. I have them resting *somewhere quiet*.”

Tatsuya, of course, wouldn’t let that degree of pressure bowl him over. Insincere smile still on his face, he continued his inquiry, tone casual. “I see. Then would you be able to tell me their identities, at least?”

“Sure. They were feral magicians employed by the Traditionalists.”

“Feral?” repeated Tatsuya dubiously. “You mean freelancers?”

“You could call them that.”

“I didn’t know we had them in Japan.”

Magicians were a rare human resource. Nations were exhaustive in their management of them, from children to the elderly, from upstanding citizens to criminals. Tatsuya himself was an exception, in a way, removed from public management—but people like him were, for the most part, assets the Twenty-Eight kept as part of their private combat force; one could say the nation was indirectly managing them through the Ten Master Clans system. The fact that there were magicians with practical magic capabilities who weren’t part of any organization came as a novel surprise.

“Well, sure. There’s quite a few cases where someone can’t learn modern magic, but they still learn to use a specific spell.”

“...Does that mean there are a lot of ancient-style freelancing magicians?”

“I couldn’t tell you a precise number, but I believe there’s more than a few of them.”



That all pointed to the possibility that Tatsuya might need to take on more magicians than he'd imagined thus far. He mentally adjusted the job's expected difficulty upward.



October 1, 2096: First High's new student council was inaugurated. Its members: Miyuki Shiba as president, Izumi Saegusa as vice president, Honoka Mitsui as treasurer, Minami Sakurai as secretary, and Tatsuya Shiba as *executive secretary*.

There were, of course, objections to this mysterious role of "executive secretary." Even the faculty, which normally only ever gave the student council work and never interfered, asked them what was going on. By school rules, the student council member makeup was one president, one vice president, one treasurer, and one secretary. No executive secretary included—but when Miyuki gave a peremptory smile and said that it was simply a nickname and that it was officially a secretary, she shot down all opposing viewpoints. Not a soul could give voice to the reasonable objection of why they needed that nickname at all.

Tatsuya remaining a student council member was also something a majority of the students wanted. If Miyuki were to go out of control, only Tatsuya could stop her. That was a view shared by the juniors and seniors, and they knew that if they drove Tatsuya out of the student council, she *would* go crazy.

In this manner, this year's First High student council did in a way present a look of dictatorship through fear, but it had also caused a somewhat beyond-redemption state where the students *under its control* thought it was a fun thing. Perhaps it might be called dictatorship-by-idol. For the dictator, it was a kind of paradise.

Of course, Miyuki had no ambitions to rule anything and even less of a desire to become a dictator. In truth, the role of student council president was a reluctant one for her. Her genuine feelings were that her brother should be the president instead. With the addition—a dangerous delusion no matter who you asked—that if he *were* president, then she could devote all of herself to him, whether it was as vice president, secretary, or tea pourer.

In any case, Miyuki didn't want to place Tatsuya in a position lower than herself. That would constantly remind her of their relationship as members of the Yotsuba family, and she couldn't stand that. By going so far as to trump up the *executive secretary* title, which was useless in official matters, she settled things in a way that pleased her.

Anyway, with all that in play, Miyuki had spent an hour during lunch break and after school *persuading* those dubious, objecting, and opposing viewpoints to Tatsuya's installation as executive secretary into oblivion, and now calm had finally returned to the student council room.

As though he'd aimed for that exact timing, the new disciplinary committee chairman—which had changed along with the new student council inauguration—came to the student council room for greetings.

"Umm, I look forward to working with you for the next year."

"Thank you. I do as well, Yoshida."

With Mikihiko nervous and unable to rid himself of his formality toward her despite maintaining a friendly attitude, Miyuki gave him back a smile filled with familiarity.

Contrary to the majority prediction that Shizuku would take over for Kanon, Mikihiko had been chosen as the new committee chairman. The committee had taken a vote from its nine members, and Mikihiko got five votes, while Shizuku got four. Incidentally, Mikihiko had voted for Shizuku, and vice versa. Some had tried to block Mikihiko's induction, as he used to be a Course 2 student, but with Shizuku radiating an imposing aura from her whole body that said *that's annoying and dumb*, most of the members had yielded.

Shizuku, for her part, was ignoring Mikihiko and having a nice little girls' conversation with Honoka: "Isn't it great? Tatsuya got to stay in the student council." "Yep..."

Normally the first meeting after elections between the student council and disciplinary committee was all about who to replace the retired disciplinary committee members with, but since the student council's recommended committee members all happened to be juniors who stayed with the committee, Mikihiko's conversation really did end as only a greeting. He

seemed to be thinking about the rest of the various paperwork still to be done and looked like he didn't have enough time for it. Tatsuya caught him and brought him to a stand-alone terminal in the corner of the room.

Sensing something amiss, Mikihiko sat down in front of the terminal Tatsuya was standing at and asked in a low voice, "What's wrong, Tatsuya?"

"I want you to look at this first."

Without directly answering the question, Tatsuya typed on the terminal's keyboard with one hand.

Rows of characters and graphs came up on the monitor.

"Is this an activation sequence?"

The machine-language activation sequence hadn't been converted into psion signals but instead into an easily readable modeling language and graphs.

"This is...an activation sequence describing the structure of a *shikigami*? I'm surprised you found data this rare."

"It was a coincidence. Anyway, what I wanted to ask was, does *shikigami* structure vary by school?"

Mikihiko seemed to think he'd found this in a library somewhere. Tatsuya asked about what it was in a roundabout way, without saying he'd analyzed and put together the structure on his own.

"Of course, yeah. And they're usually pretty easy to spot. This one, for example... I think it's based on a *shugendo* system. I'm pretty sure it's a *shikigami* used by casters in the Touzan school of *shugendo*."

"*Shugendo* has factions?"

"They're not factions so much as schools of thought—or, I guess, sects. This is Shingon Buddhism-type *shugendo*."

"Shingon? I thought *shikigami* were a technique in onmyoudou and Taoism. Esoteric Buddhism has ways to employ *shikigami*, too?"

Mikihiko nodded, feathers preening a bit. "Sure do. But esoteric Buddhists call them doctrines. They're essentially the same."

He casually looked back at the monitor and then made a surprised face. “What’s this? It’s been arranged, and in a weird way...”

After staring at the monitor for a short while, Mikihiko peered up at Tatsuya, looking like he’d figured it out.

“I get it. I know why you were sneaking around the subject now. You found this on an underground website, didn’t you?”

“Why would you think that?”

Tatsuya’s question was an honest request for an answer, but Mikihiko nodded, his face one of understanding. “This *shikigami* is clearly for spying, isn’t it?”

“Is that right?”

Tatsuya meant that in the sense of *Shikigami had such subtle usage differences?*

But Mikihiko seemed to have interpreted it in a more limited way. “It’s clearly something you’d use for illegal purposes.”

“I see. So it was dangerous... I made the right choice coming to you with this. I’ll erase the data.”

“Yeah, that’s for the best.” Mikihiko grinned, still perky from the casual flattery.

Mikihiko returned to the disciplinary committee HQ to draft his patrol records—apparently, it had been quite a while since the chair person had done their own activity logs. A short time before closing, he went to the club committee to say hello to its new chairman.

“Igarashi, congratulations on becoming chairman.”

“Y-yes! Thank you very much, Chairman!”

The new chairman was nervous—or rather, hysterically skittish—with Miyuki there.

“We will probably need to call on the club committee many times to keep the student council running smoothly. I look forward to working with you.”

“S-s-s-same goes to you! We will probably need to have the student council members’ help with several things. I hope we can help each other in the future!”

Izumi, watching Miyuki and Igarashi’s interaction from a short distance away, whispered, “He seems a little unreliable,” to Honoka, who was standing next to her. Honoka simply gave her a pained grin in response.

Miyuki and the new club committee chairman’s meeting ended, and the student council members started preparing to go home, too. This “preparation,” unlike schoolwork in the previous century, didn’t require them to take home any textbooks. As for gym and practice uniforms, they could use the school’s cleaning service for no charge. On a regular day, they’d be bringing at most their personal information terminal and a few other small items, and if using a CAD with exchangeable storage like Tatsuya, the cartridges for it. With almost no time required to get all one’s belongings together, the main “preparation” involved things like checking data backups and verifying leftover tasks.

“The new chairman Igarashi seemed a little weakhearted—or rather, quiet, didn’t he?”

While they worked, Izumi suddenly, as though just remembering, gave her impressions on the new club committee chairman, Igarashi, to Miyuki.

“Yes, he seemed quite nervous. I wonder why?”

“Nervous?” said Izumi rather dubiously.

“Miyuki, did you know about Igarashi before?”

With Miyuki wavering on how best to answer Izumi’s very straightforward response, Tatsuya threw her a life raft. “Yes. We’re in different classes, but Igarashi is near the top in practical ability grades, so we’ve been grouped a few times in data measurements. But I think Honoka or Shizuku would know him better than me. I believe they’re in the same club.”

When Miyuki glanced at her, Honoka said, “He’s the little brother of last year’s girls’ biathlon club president.”

“His magic of choice isn’t right for it, so his competition results aren’t great.

But his actual skills, at least, are excellent.”

“At least?” repeated Tatsuya, sensing something behind Shizuku’s choice of words.

“Igarashi is, well...not exactly weak-willed, but he has a tendency to step back when push comes to shove. It leads him to making reckless decisions when cornered and self-destructing... Maybe the best way to put it is his personality isn’t good with competition.”

“He’s better as a staff officer or a vice general. He’s not really meant to be a leader.”

After Honoka struggled to choose a more mild way to express it, Shizuku ruined it by coming down with a more severe evaluation.

“Come to think of it, why wasn’t Tomitsuka made chairman?” offered Mikihiko, who had once again come to the student council room after finishing his disciplinary committee work.

“It was really looking like he was a shoo-in going into it, huh?” remarked Kasumi casually, perhaps used to it because they were both disciplinary committee members.

“I’m sure Hattori had his own ideas in mind.”

Implying it was the job of the club committee to come up with their own chairman, Miyuki urged an end to the gossip about Igarashi before it could turn into backbiting.



With the student council elections over, at a stopping point after the new student council member choices, preparations for the Thesis Competition were finally in full swing. Though the Kyoto version gave pure academic fields the advantage, any magic theory competition would always require a magical demonstration, and the creation of the experimental tools for that was proceeding at a fever pitch.

Unlike last year, though, that work wasn’t located in the courtyard but mainly in lecture halls. The bombastic work scenes of last year had retreated into the shadows; now, students silently struggling with intricate blueprints were the

focus of observation.

On a second-level seat in the lecture hall, looking down at the work led by Isori to create a projection-type magic circle, Tatsuya was having a security meeting with Mikihiko.

“...Then it’s all right if we choose volunteer security members from everywhere again this year and not just from the disciplinary committee?”

“Of course. There’s no way the nine people in the committee could handle everything themselves anyway. I wanted to recruit volunteers from the local security force, too, not just our representative guards.”

“Hattori is in charge of the whole security detail this year, right?”

“He’s currently in an online meeting with the students in charge of other schools’ security.”

“They weren’t mad that a First High student has been in charge of everything for two years in a row now?”

“No, that’s fine. Apparently, there’s an unwritten rule that whichever school wins Monolith Code at the Nines gets to nominate the head of security.”

“Really? I didn’t know it was like that.”

“Yeah. I guess Juumonji wasn’t in charge last year just because he was from the Ten Master Clans, huh?”

Leo and Erika had broken into Tatsuya and Mikihiko’s conversation. They’d been quiet until now so as not to get in the way, and as such, their remarks here seemed unintentional, caused by surprise more than anything else.

“Yeah, that’s the first I’ve heard of it, too.”

“I actually didn’t know until a little while ago, either. I guess there’s things you’d never know about unless you asked.”

Despite the interruption, though, neither Tatsuya nor Mikihiko, respectively, looked like they minded it.

“Anyway, Tatsuya, which do you want to handle? Escort or security?”

“You’re assuming I’m going to help out at all.”

“Well, of course. I’ll be relying on you.”

That was a brazen way of putting it, but Tatsuya didn’t indicate any refusal to Mikihiko’s request—he just grinned without saying anything. He’d come to talk to Mikihiko to get the student council and disciplinary committee on the same page and helping each other, but he’d been willing to help out personally as well.

“Let’s see—I’ll go with local security, then.”

Being in Kyoto would be more convenient for his “work” anyway.

“Then let me help you out there.” Thinking something upon hearing that, Leo suddenly raised his hand. “And if it’s local security, we’ll need to prepare beforehand.”

...Actually, it was plain as day what he’d thought of.

“What? No, I’m going with Tatsuya to Kyoto, so you go be a bodyguard instead. That’s what you’re good at, right? Being a meat shield?” objected Erika in a tone that certainly did not sound like a joke at all.

“The whole point of a meat shield is to get beaten and stabbed! I’m a human being, you know!”

“There’s also the option of getting shot.”

The last part, of course, was a joke. Mikihiko was more interested in the first half of what she’d said, because it had sounded serious. “Erika... If you’re going to Kyoto, then you’d be staying over, right?”

“Well, of course I would.”

These days, it certainly wasn’t impossible to do a round trip between Tokyo and Kyoto in a single day. On business, in fact, it was the obvious choice. However, they needed to set up security this time, so they needed to not only look around the new Kyoto International Conference Hall, where the competition would be held, but a fairly wide area around that building as well. It was hard to imagine something like last year happening so quickly again, but they couldn’t let themselves slack off on security after something like that *had* happened last year.

“Does that mean...you want to go on an overnight trip with Tatsuya...?”

“Don’t...don’t be stupid!”

Erika, suspected of the desire for a premarital voyage, for some reason didn’t blush but paled.

“Wh...what...?”

Her energy was determined—no, desperate—actually, like her life depended on it, and it made Mikihiko trip over his words. When he heard this, the color drained from his face, too.

“What would you do if Miyuki heard you?! We’d be in serious trouble even though it *was* a joke!”

Mikihiko’s eyes quickly darted up and down, left and right. They were the eyes of someone at the center of a battlefield. Like a man facing death around every corner, and that was no exaggeration.

Not that Miyuki wouldn’t take it as a joke—it was more that *they’d still be in trouble even if she knew it was*. Erika knew Miyuki wouldn’t tolerate the very thought of what was within the joke to be spoken aloud. Mikihiko thought that was too possible—no, it was *inevitable*. Couldn’t he feel an absolute-zero chill pressing toward him even now...? He was seriously afraid.

But being so openly cautious and terrified was in itself imprudent behavior.

“...That’s my sister you’re talking about, you know.”

Creaks came from Mikihiko’s and Erika’s necks as they turned their heads toward where they’d heard the voice.

They found Tatsuya giving them a cold, penetrating grin.

“Geez, Miki... You had to go and shorten our life spans, didn’t you?”

“My *name* is Mikihiko...”

The usual argument from Mikihiko lacked energy. In reality, he harbored more sympathy for Erika right now than ever before.

Tatsuya hadn’t directly harmed them, exactly. He’d just given them that freezing-cold look. But that alone was enough to make Mikihiko feel like it had

shaved years off his life.

It wasn't the coldness of snow or ice. It was the chill of a polished blade. Something that would threaten your life more directly.

Erika felt something along the same lines, and her expression was exhausted, lifeless.

"Would you two give it a rest?" Tatsuya complained sullenly. "That's still rude."

Tatsuya probably wasn't yet convinced of his friends' attitudes. That sense of power crushing them was already gone from his look, but it bore no explanation that he was unhappy. It wasn't only the involved parties, Erika and Mikihiko, but the bystander Leo as well who strongly felt the need to change the topic.

"Uh, anyway, can't we just all be on venue security? Chiyoda is probably gonna stick real close to Isori, and Nakajou has Kitayama, right?"

Though nothing had actually been done to him, Leo must have figured it would be immature to stay angry forever. The one to respond to his tact was Tatsuya.

"It's not only Shizuku. They're having Chikura and Mibu help guard her, too."

Seeing Tatsuya's aggressive response to the change of topic, Erika and Mikihiko breathed sighs of relief. Well, they didn't *actually* do anything like that—they weren't that careless—but it was plain from their attitudes that their tension had dissolved.

"And Kei's good enough not to even need a bodyguard," noted Erika.

"Kirihara apparently volunteered for Minakami's escort, too," said Mikihiko, referring to the bodyguard role for their other representative, Kerry Minakami.

Leo groaned when he heard that for some reason. "Minakami, huh... I feel like *he* needs a bodyguard least of all." It seemed like he wasn't satisfied with Kirihara guarding Kerry. "If you went down the school rankings of combat power, it'd be faster to count from the top for him, right? I guess Mikihiko would know that, though, since he put the team together."

As Leo said, Kerry was one of the members of First High's rep team, along

with Hattori and Mikihiko, that snatched victory in this year's Monolith Code. The powerful man had shown impenetrable defensive abilities and hadn't allowed the enemy to interfere with their monolith even once.

"Regardless, Minakami has a wealth of knowledge about people's magic on an individual basis. And the reason he could completely block off enemy attacks during Monolith Code was that he has this amazing special ability where the first time an opponent uses a spell, he gets a perfect read on it, and then the second time and later, he can cancel it out with the optimal counter-spell."

Magic programs couldn't interfere with magic programs. Information Boost was a technique to make an opponent's spell misfire by raising the event stability, or how hard it is to alter events. Area Interference brushed aside an opponent's event influence by applying event influence without a specifically defined alteration to a target zone. Neither of them actually interfered with the opponent's magic program itself.

But if the spell resulted in interference with physical phenomena, it was no more than that: a physical phenomenon. Which meant that the *results* of two different alterations canceling each other out was perfectly possible. For example, if you used magic to place a decompressed mass of air in the flight path of a compressed-air bullet, the fact that one air mass was higher pressure than the air around it and the other was lower meant those things would cancel out, and when the magic program was unable to maintain its definitions, it would throw an error. In other words, the spell would stop. The phenomenon was called magic-canceling. If you had a much higher power of influence than the opponent, you could blot it out with an event alteration in the other direction and maintain your own spell. But if yours was only a little higher, it would clash with the event's self-stabilization and the canceling phenomenon would occur with higher priority.

However, in order to consciously perform magic-canceling, you needed to accurately predict what sort of event alteration your opponent was going for, including its coordinates. This nullification of magic via canceling out was easy to say but hard to pull off.

"The thing where any magic he's already seen once won't work anymore? That's kind of awesome."

Even Leo, who made that light joke, fully understood how advanced the technique was.

“Ha-ha-ha. Anyway, what I mean is, Minakami is actually better at theory,” said Mikihiko as he went along and laughed at Leo’s childish joke, offering an answer that wasn’t really an answer.

The one who resolved the concerns about whether Minakami needed a bodyguard was Erika. “What you mean is, Kirihara would be the shield for that first shot,” she suggested, still bound to ideas of meat shields.

“Oh, I get it!” said Leo, immediately accepting it as soon as it was about someone other than him.

“The two of you, I swear...”

Mizuki’s cold eyes bored into them.



The shift from collective to small-group public transportation didn’t apply only to trains. It had become conventional to use “commuters,” or driverless taxis, to go between your home and the nearest station. To do so, you would use your Resident ID to call a commuter to your house, and when going from the station to your home, you would catch an empty car at the platform in front of the station. For street corners where there was no commuter platform, you could access the public transportation network from your portable device and call an empty car.

Tatsuya and the others, too, lived a normal life in this aspect, using commuters to go back and forth between home and the station. It wouldn’t be necessary if they could use magic, but unfortunately, magic usage was tightly restricted by laws and ordinances. Modern society was still not so lenient toward magicians to let it be used willy-nilly on the streets.

Even now, having come very late due to Thesis Competition prep work, Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Minami were waiting in front of the station under a sky dyed violet.

An absence of empty cars in front of the station was not that rare a thing. Having no wait time ever would mean there was an excess of cars in the system

—in other words, a system of oversupply was wasteful and unnecessary.

Besides, the allocation of cabinets was linked to their service data, so the system almost never made you wait more than five minutes. That is to say, enough of them were available that their users wouldn't feel inconvenienced.

In fact, the three of them waited only about two minutes this time around. A commuter approached in the designated lane in front of the station. It stopped once at the arrival platform, about ten meters from the boarding platform where Tatsuya and the others waited, and a single man who looked to be in his early thirties alighted from it. The doors closed automatically, and seeing the wheeled vehicle start moving again without going out onto the public road and instead slowly approach them, Tatsuya put his right hand into the pocket hiding his CAD.

Startled, Minami looked up at Tatsuya's face, then hastily over toward the commuter. As she watched, before the parked cabinet's door could open, psionic waves burst from inside.

Before Tatsuya could pull out his CAD, Minami constructed a cylindrical anti-object, heat-resistant barrier. The targets of protection were herself and Miyuki. The reason she hadn't put Tatsuya behind the barrier was so it wouldn't obstruct his movement—the result of repeated training for the last half a year.

However, the psionic waves that poured out of the vehicle's interior weren't for casting magic.

Psionic noise scattered chaotically, echoing, overlapping. No effects that would block magic like Cast Jamming. Instead, its density was far higher than Cast Jamming, enough to block the magical perception to identify the psions. You could probably call it a psionic smoke screen.

Self-destructing a synthetic spirit?! Is it like a psionic time bomb?!

With Miyuki and Minami falling into confusion, Tatsuya immediately saw through to what the attack *really* was.

If this is a magical smoke screen, then next... “Minami, Descending Whirlwind.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Minami cast the spell as soon as his words were done. A rotating water jet molded into a violent wave before abruptly changing into a thick mist.

It would have been a struggle to create even a simple magical wind had it been after the dispersion of mist. The air that was the target of her airflow manipulation would end up mixed in with the tiny water droplets under the enemy's influence.

But the point in time Minami cast the spell was before the mist reached their group. The only reason the difficulty of manipulating airflows increased when tiny, highly dense water droplets mixed in with the air was that the droplets obstructed the caster's aim; being damp after you finished taking aim wouldn't hamper the spell.

As a result, the air, drawn near from the sky by the Descending Whirlwind spell, created a raging whirlwind on the ground. It blew outwardly, with Minami at the center, immediately blowing away the veil of mist that had blocked their vision.

The short man who had jumped out of the commuter parked right in front of them locked eyes with Tatsuya, who was at the front of the school-age group of three. A small, modern crossbow was gripped in the man's hand, and his eyes were wide with astonishment—apparently, it surprised him that his magical dazzler had been so quickly broken. However, it would have been too nice to call getting flustered over something a little unexpected *inexperienced*. All it was...was an opening.

And Tatsuya would never let that go. He flung out his right leg toward the man. A dropping, spinning kick—that slammed the crossbow out of the man's hand.

Tatsuya continued around, bending his leg and preparing a side kick.

Released, the attack gouged the man in the gut. He crashed into the commuter cabinet behind him and slumped against it. He must have hit the back of his head—not only did he not stand up, he didn't even make a move after that. Either his consciousness was fading or he was out cold.

The crossbow's safety was apparently already disengaged; when it fell to the road, an arrow fired from it. Fortunately, though, it bounced harmlessly against

the road.

As his leg came down, Tatsuya sensed a shimmering of psions—someone trying to build a magic program—to his right. He whipped around in that direction. The one who had given off the magical premonition was the man who had left the commuter at the arrival platform.

This time, Tatsuya tried to pull out his CAD for sure—but stopped halfway through.

Before he could react, Miyuki had already intercepted.

The first one to commence the magical build process was the man, assumed to be an enemy. But the one who actually activated her spell first was Miyuki.

Their assailant fired his spell. Tatsuya's information body perception ability caught the magic program shooting toward a spot a meter above his sister's head. And he also *saw* that magic program dissipating, unable to do anything.

"Brother, that was visible, right?"

Miyuki's question was a confirmation of whether the psionic wave sensors next to the roadway cameras had recorded the enemy's spell—in other words, to build an alibi for justified self-defense.

"Probably. And even if it didn't, we have witnesses, so it should be fine."

He realized that at least four other people aside from them in this station had reacted to the initial psionic wave and expanded activation sequences. He saved their faces in his memory as well. If they were magicians, they would have *seen* the exchange just now.

Even during the siblings' short Q&A session, the man fired his spell three times.

Miyuki's Area Interference blocked them all.

The stranger set about building a fifth magic program. This spell wasn't for attacking—it was for escaping.

The enemy turned on his heel.

"You won't get away," declared Miyuki quietly.

The man vanished from sight for a moment, and then when he regained color a moment later, he fell face-first with the movements of a stringless marionette.

Tatsuya squatted next to the man and put a hand to his neck. Next, he held his hand up to the man's nose, confirming that he was still breathing, albeit weakly.

"That shouldn't leave any lasting effects. You've gotten better, Miyuki."

What she'd used was a spell that lowered a person's body temperature and took away their bodily functions. It was a difficult technique to temper, leaving aftereffects on the target if you were just a few degrees too low, but this time it had been skillfully kept within a range so as to not overdo it on the attack. Soaking up the praise, Miyuki thanked her brother, her cheeks flushing slightly.

The man's face was a mess, though, since he'd fallen in a semiconscious state and couldn't break the fall. She was a blushing beauty in front of a man stained by bruises, scrapes, and a nosebleed. If an outsider were to view the scene, they'd get a pretty surreal impression.

Still, as for the severity of their wounds, the short man Tatsuya had kicked away had it far worse. Tatsuya had tied up the man's hands and feet so that he couldn't escape and left him on the roadside. In terms of relative inhumanity, Tatsuya would certainly be declared the winner.

"Big Brother Tatsuya?"

He didn't bother to consider aiding the target they'd brought down; when Minami addressed him, he simply stood back up.

"Please look at this." She held up the crossbow bolt in her hand.

"Arrow of Demons' Bane, as I thought," murmured Tatsuya quietly. The bolt was actually floating above her palm.

"...You have some idea as to what this is?"

It must have struck Minami as strange that he didn't show even the least bit of surprise. Her abstract question was a reflexive one.

"Well, I only saw it right before I kicked him."

Minami wasn't flabbergasted; there was no screech of *In that instant?! like* there might have been with others. She was a maid and a bodyguard raised by the Yotsuba; she'd seen many who seemed to defy common sense during her training at the main Yotsuba residence. In fact, because of their differences in level, her standard was fixed firmly on the nonsensical end. To her, and perhaps her alone, Tatsuya's physical abilities were plenty within a "sensical" range.

Tatsuya had only glanced at it, but Miyuki gazed at it fixedly. "A tool for obstructing magic, used in ancient magic, right?"

"Technically, a tool that disrupts magic using spiritual beings," Tatsuya explained. "It doesn't have much effect on types of magic that directly fire a magic program at a target."

Miyuki tilted her head to the side. "Did he believe we were magicians of ancient magic?"

"Well, unlike the *real* Arrow of Demons' Bane, this arrow would be lethal enough just by striking its target..." muttered Tatsuya cynically, gazing at the highly sharpened arrowhead.

From its appearance alone, it was a perfectly regular, short arrow made for crossbows, its only distinctive features that the shaft and the arrowhead were integrated, and it used real bird feathers. But the shaft, which appeared to be simple compressed wood, was actually fashioned from a specially compressed material made from incantations (or at other times, mantras or Shinto prayers) written on wood that'd been shaved down the long way—like a thin roll of paper, all bundled up together. Though its name and construction were reminiscent of Shinto rituals, Shinto-type casters wouldn't be the only ones using it. It was a common tool of ancient magicians who used letters as a medium.

"Yeah, this is a weapon with SB magic in mind. Unless they just made a mistake and attacked the wrong people, they must have had a reason to mistake us for ancient magicians."

But before he could say any more, police approached through the crowd, announcing themselves.

"We'll talk about the rest once we get home."

The incident had happened in front of the station nearest their house. There were plenty of witnesses, and they were doubtlessly caught on the roadside cameras. Running away would be a foolish move.

Tatsuya sighed, thinking about how long they'd be in custody for questioning.

The three of them were released from the station after approximately one hour. Even that could be called quick. The reason their position as victims hadn't been immediately treated as suspicious must have been because they had data from the roadside cameras and psionic wave sensors.

"And now it's really late."

Considering just the time of day, it wasn't late enough to be called that. But his mental fatigue was making it feel a lot later than it really was.

That didn't go only for Tatsuya, either.

"Yes, it is... I'll get dinner ready at once." Exhaustion was leaking through Miyuki's voice as well.

"Big Sister Miyuki, you must allow me." Minami, too, spoke in an unusually tired tone. Was it stubbornness, then, or earnestness that made her still fight for her right to stand in the kitchen? It was probably both, Miyuki found herself thinking.

"Really? Then maybe I'll leave it to you."

"Yes."

Looking taken aback at how easily the Shiba sister had given in, Minami headed for the kitchen without changing her clothes first.

"Brother, I will prepare for tomorrow."

But at that next remark, Minami turned around in surprise. A faint color of worry was apparent on her face. Tomorrow was the day they'd be visiting the Kudou estate. She was caught between two warring responsibilities—between needing to assist with those preparations as a maid, despite it only being an overnight stay, and the fact that she had to get dinner out soon.

"You don't need to rush like that. Why don't you both get changed first? We can take our time getting ready for tomorrow after we eat."

“Yes, Big Brother Tatsuya. I will do that.”

For Minami, who could no longer make a move, Tatsuya’s words were a lifesaver.

“Big Brother Tatsuya has given us a command. Let us go, Big Sister Miyuki.”

Without giving Miyuki any time to put her two cents in, Minami chased her master up to the second floor.

In the end, Miyuki and Minami jointly pursued the preparations for Tatsuya’s part alone, and then they got themselves ready separately. Tatsuya had been smiling one of those what-else-can-you-do smiles as he watched them having fun fishing through his closet, discussing which things to bring.

And thus, after sitting down in the living room for their delayed teatime, Tatsuya began to speak to them about the earlier attack.

“Those guys earlier must have been ancient magicians. The Arrow of Demons’ Bane points to that, though the invisibility spell the other one used to try to escape wasn’t the kind that interferes with the reflection and refraction of light. Instead, it was a mental interference spell that makes it harder to perceive the caster. It’s in the same family as the technique Retsu Kudou used at the Nine School Competition opening ceremony last year.”

“Then were they sent by the Kudou family?” Miyuki asked.

Tatsuya shook his head. “If they were Kudou family casters, they wouldn’t have mistaken us for old-school magicians. They were probably sent by the Traditionalists, in fact—the faction opposing them.”

“Fumiya spoke of these Traditionalists as well... Their name is quite extravagant, but what traditions do they even espouse, and what do they entail?”

Miyuki tilted her head, dubious. Anybody who didn’t know the origin of the name *Traditionalist* would have certainly felt the same way.

“I doubt there’s much of a meaning at all,” Tatsuya quipped, grinning painfully at Miyuki’s harsh remark and shaking his head. As he did, though, he suddenly looked mildly surprised. “Minami, you seem to know of them.”

“Yes. I was taught at the main family house that they are a magical society to be cautious of. If I recall, they are an assembly of ancient magicians betrayed by old Lab Nine, who wish for revenge against the Ten Master Clans.”

Minami, who hadn’t shown any signs that she harbored doubts, did indeed know about them.

“I think it’s too much to decide their goals are revenge, but everything else is the same as what I know.”

A slight difference in perception still existed between them, but knowledge was always filtered through the process of its conveyance, so one could say this much was unavoidable.

“As for the reason they mistook us for ancient magicians... Miyuki, do you remember the other day when a synthetic spirit was trying to spy on the house?”

“Yes—that was this past Sunday.”

“Master’s pupils apparently captured the casters who did that.”

“Oh... Then they mistook us for students of Sensei’s as well?”

Miyuki nodded, convinced. On the other hand, though, it didn’t seem to sit well with Minami.

“What’s wrong, Minami?” asked Miyuki. “You know about Yakumo-sensei, don’t you?”

It wasn’t exactly keen of her, but Miyuki still noticed it and implied that if Minami had something to ask them, she needn’t hold herself back.

“Yes, well, I do, of course, know of him... But why would Lord Yakumo have captured the magicians searching this house?”

The light in Minami’s eyes was more than a simple question—it was suspicion. Miyuki didn’t know what was bothering her, but Tatsuya did.

“Actually, you’re misunderstanding. Miyuki and I aren’t under Master’s protection or anything.”

Minami had thought that if Tatsuya not only learned martial arts from him but

entered under his patronage, that would be a kind of betrayal against the Yotsuba family.

“Master is always saying he’s a *shinobi* before a monk. As a *shinobi*, he probably can’t leave people sniffing around his neighborhood alone. Even if he’s not the one they’re spying on.”

“Is that how it is?”

That explanation seemed to finally persuade Minami; the suspicion vanished from her eyes.

“I learned two things thanks to the attack today,” Tatsuya said. Now that her odd suspicions had cleared, it was time to get down to business. “First, that the enemy—probably the Traditionalists—are clearly targeting us.”

Tension shot through Miyuki’s and Minami’s faces.

“Second, that the enemy doesn’t know our true identities.”

Miyuki successfully held back her surprise, but Minami gave a small cry.

“We know almost for certain the enemy was trailing Fumiya and Ayako. They would have to know that they’re Kurobas and that the Kuroba are a family with ties to the Yotsuba. At the very least, Gongjin Zhou would have known the Kuroba handle shady business for the Yotsuba.”

And then, as if finding something funny, Tatsuya let out a chuckle.

“Brother?”

“Er, sorry. When I said the Kuroba handle shady business, it made it sound like the Yotsuba family handle the aboveground jobs, and that made me laugh. Don’t worry about it.” Tatsuya shook off the thought and got back on topic. “What I mean is, he may know that people related to the Yotsuba came to visit us, but not about our connection to the Yotsuba. In fact, they don’t even consider us magicians who are subordinate to the Yotsuba. If they did, they wouldn’t have come out with spell equipment to use against ancient magic.”

“You mean that...they see us as ancient magicians employed by the Kuroba, who themselves are subordinate to the Yotsuba?” Minami asked, her stomach tight with a vague sense of danger.

“That’s what it would mean. The enemy knows we exist but not who we are. They don’t know why the Kuroba chose us as collaborators.”

“In other words...there’s a possibility the enemy’s attacks could extend past us?” Minami finished.

Miyuki’s eyes widened a little, and Tatsuya’s narrowed slightly. “Yeah,” he affirmed. “We can’t ignore the chance that they’ll target someone like Erika or Mikihiko. Or the chance that they’d take Honoka or Mizuki captive.”

“Should we not ask Aunt Maya or Mr. Kuroba to assign bodyguards to them?” Miyuki was able to stay relatively calm because her brother wasn’t in a panic. Still, she knew this situation called for haste. The fact that she’d suggested going to Maya without hesitation was proof of that.

“Let’s not ask Aunt Maya. We might ask for bodyguards, but they might end up being used as bait.”

“Then what about Sensei?”

“Sounds expensive, but...I guess we don’t have a choice.” Tatsuya downed the contents of his cup and stood. “I’ll go see him now.”

He’d planned to head there to practice the new spell anyway, but he was ready to leave immediately. His attaché case with the CAD he used for the experimentation was waiting for him at the front door, too.

“You two get some sleep. And make sure to lock up,” he said to the women, removing his Trident CAD from the storage box near the front door and equipping it. A moment later, he completed his outfitting by throwing on a thin blouson over his head.

““Yes, of course.””

Seen off by the women of his household, who bowed and spoke in unison, Tatsuya stepped through the front door.



The next morning, Tatsuya was exactly the same as he always was. Neither Miyuki nor Minami could tell whatsoever what sort of conversation he'd had with Yakumo the night before. But his being no different from usual was also a behavior that let them feel relieved that their safety had been somehow ensured.

Tatsuya himself, however, was far from relieved. He wasn't the type to find relief with only a single layer of insurance.

After classes had ended, he was in the student council room. Since they had to go to the Kudou estate in Ikoma today at six, Miyuki had just excused herself for personal matters, leaving the remaining work to Honoka and Izumi.

"Shizuku," Tatsuya said to his classmate, who had come to hang out.

"What?"

The response was unfriendly, but Tatsuya knew that didn't mean Shizuku herself was being unfriendly, so it didn't bother him. "Would you mind having Honoka stay over for a while?"

"Huh?!"

The one who raised her voice was Honoka; Shizuku only frowned a little. "Why?"

"Because it might be dangerous to be alone."

"...Umm, what are you talking about?" asked Honoka, face pale with unease.

Tatsuya, of course, intended to explain his reasoning, insofar as was possible. "We were attacked yesterday when we got out of the station."

"What?! Was anyone hurt?!" Izumi asked immediately, her voice loud. She

turned to Miyuki.

“We’re fine. Neither I, nor Brother, nor Minami suffered even a scratch.”

Izumi put a hand to her chest and breathed a sigh of relief at Miyuki’s smile, then slowly returned to her seat.

“Like Miyuki said, nobody was hurt. But we don’t know what was behind the attack.”

That was half a lie. But the other half was truth, and in this case, that was more important.

“And the police?” asked Shizuku.

“They haven’t contacted us, so I believe they are probably still investigating it,” replied Miyuki.

“Then you don’t know who it was?”

“Only that they were ancient magicians.”

“That’s it? Any other ideas?”

“Like Brother said, we don’t know why they attacked us.”

“Then maybe...” Honoka, who had been listening to Shizuku and Miyuki’s exchange, began thinking in the direction Tatsuya wanted: “Was there a chance they weren’t after you personally, and they only attacked because you were in First High’s student council?”

Tatsuya didn’t exactly want to frighten Honoka, either, but in this situation, it was better that she remained cautious. “We don’t know. But as I said before, I think it’s best to avoid being alone.”

“All right.” Shizuku put a hand on Honoka’s trembling shoulder. “Honoka, please come to my house today.”

“...Okay, I will. I have to get ready, so can I leave with them?”

“That’s fine.”

Honoka was hesitant, seeming resistant to suddenly stay with someone else—even if it was a good friend—but in the end, she took Shizuku up on her goodwill and Tatsuya up on his advice.

Tatsuya's secret maneuvers didn't end there.

"...Anyway, we don't know who's after us in this situation."

"Meaning it could be related to the Thesis Competition, but it also might not be."

After telling Miyuki and Minami to wait up for him, Tatsuya went and gave the same mix of truth and lies to Mikihiko. Mikihiko had come to observe Isori's work in the lecture hall again today, in addition to serving as a guard. His question to Tatsuya's edited version of the story was just something to keep the conversation going.

"That's right. As long as we don't know their reasons, we can't narrow down the target, either."

It didn't seem like Mikihiko was doubting what Tatsuya was saying. To defend Mikihiko a bit here, this was less an expression of kindness toward others and more because he'd accepted the weight of the fact that a First High student had been attacked at this particular time.

"Should we send more bodyguards?"

"No, Nakajou has enough people with her, and with the Isori/Chiyoda and Minakami/Kirihara pairings, they should be able to drive off most opponents."

Leo, who had been listening to their conversation in silence, nodded several times. "More importantly, my concern is you guys and Mizuki. You're the ones I'm closest to at First High."

At the words *closest to*, the two young men looked slightly embarrassed.

On the other hand, the only one whose harsh expression remained, without even a smile, was the lone woman in the group, Erika. "I'll be fine. Miki goes without saying...and I guess Leo will be okay, too."

"I'm more worried about *you*," Leo said, shooting the insult back. "You *are* a woman, despite everything else."

But Erika's response was different from usual: "Yeah. Like this moron says, I'm more worried about Mizuki. In terms of combat power, she's just a regular girl."

As if thinking the same thing, Mikihiko nodded at her remark, his expression

nervous. “Yeah...”

“...Tatsuya, I’ll stick with Mizuki for a while,” Erika said. “Would leaving school together be enough?”

The three men all shook their heads.

“I just *said* you’re a woman, too, remember?” Leo insisted.

“No matter how skilled you are, it’s dangerous. They’re using ancient magic. I doubt you’d lose if you fought them head-on, but we don’t know what kind of tricks they’ll use. Right, Tatsuya?”

“I agree with Mikihiko. You’d be fine protecting yourself, but if you need to protect Mizuki, you’d have trouble.”

Leo’s simple objection aside—though his may have been the most effective—Mikihiko’s and Tatsuya’s views were reasonable, too, so Erika didn’t press the point.

“...Then you go with her, Miki.”

“What?!”

Erika didn’t forget to toss in an explosive counterattack, though.

“Yeah... Mikihiko, can I ask you to do that?”

“Huh? I...but—”

“Make sure to take her all the way to her house. And don’t forget to say hello to her parents, either. If you don’t, they could mistake you for a stalker.”

“Ugh...”

Mikihiko understood the necessity. But on an emotional level, he was very hesitant. Especially to the *say hello to her parents* part.

“I’ll tell Mizuki about it,” Erika said.

“All right, thanks,” Tatsuya added.

It wasn’t *exactly* a struggle between logic and emotion.

“...Fine. It would be too late if I said yes *after* something happened.”

Quashing his embarrassment and awkwardness under a noble pretext,

Mikihiko decided to be straightforward.



After he finished taking all the usual measures, Tatsuya headed for Ikoma with Miyuki and Minami in tow. They'd be taking the same linear train from last time to Nara, then going by cabinet the rest of the way. Save for the spots where the ruins and historical buildings were concentrated, the Keihanshin region was equipped with a transportation network that rivaled the Tokyo metropolitan area's.

The linear train was a hit once again with the two women of his home—enough to make Tatsuya consider traveling out a little farther next time. Privately looking forward to that, they headed from the eastern foot of Mount Ikoma toward the Kudou estate.

The Ten Master Clans had never had a custom of amiable visits to one another. At most, it was men and women of age looking for relationships and marriage, and even then, that wasn't especially frequent from a normal viewpoint. Tatsuya and Miyuki, who were hiding their connection to the Yotsuba family, had particularly few opportunities of that nature. What that all meant was that this was naturally the first time they'd visited the Kudou estate, but their commuter had a reliable GPS it seemed.

When they arrived, it was 5:55, almost exactly as planned.

They alighted from the commuter and rang the doorbell. When the intercom came on, it wasn't a servant but Fujibayashi.

"Welcome, Tatsuya. And Miyuki and Minami, too. I'm happy you all made it."

"Thank you for going along with all this."

That had been the plan right from the outset, but with Fujibayashi having come to Ikoma from Tokyo ahead of them so that she could welcome them here, even Tatsuya had to show his gratitude.

"Don't worry about it. Don't be shy—come on in."

Having come to greet them at the gate, Fujibayashi invited the three of them inside with a smile.

Indeed, the front yard would have needed guiding through if you weren't Tatsuya with his sort of clairvoyant abilities. Minami looked impressed, her eyes darting left and right. Miyuki's gaze was politely fixed to her brother's back, but she seemed at least a little moved by the verdant walls jumping into the corners of her vision.

The path from the Kudou estate gate to the front door was a maze made of hedge walls over two meters tall. They probably had a vehicle entrance elsewhere, although that, too, doubtlessly had some sort of trick to it. If the people entrance was a maze consisting of magical patterns, the vehicle entrance being a free pass was an impossibility.

This mansion is like a fortress...

Seen from outside the gate, it was certainly extravagant, but in all other respects it was a perfectly normal three-story Western-style construction.

Take one step inside the gate, though, and it was a house of tricks that would repel uninvited guests. Or perhaps it had been a lord's mansion once, before being formally built into a fortress.

"I bet you're surprised at how excessive it is." Fujibayashi smiled, apparently sensing that Tatsuya was feeling appalled.

"This wasn't something we made to defend against Traditionalist attacks. We've been building up this mansion's defenses a little at a time ever since it was built, incorporating research results from old Lab Nine. Taking up residence in a mansion here was a decision made by the government at the time. And do you know why?" she asked, saying it like she was asking a child a riddle.

Tatsuya didn't know what answer she was looking for, whether he should say he didn't know or answer correctly, but he wasn't exactly brimming with hospitality. "I hear it was to keep watch over Osaka."

"How dull... You're right."

She really is like a little kid with a secret sometimes, Tatsuya thought when he saw how disappointed she was. This time, he pegged his thought as one to keep to himself.

"Brother, what were they watching over in Osaka?"

Still, there was a reason Fujibayashi had asked with such a look of triumph—Tatsuya’s knowledge wasn’t commonplace.

Though Miyuki had asked her brother, this time, Fujibayashi seized upon the chance. “Since Osaka is an international industrial city, it’s tolerant toward foreigners visiting and easy to find housing in. There will always be spies that will slip through surveillance, so if some incident were to happen, it was easy to lose the initiative.”

“And this was to solve that?”

“Yes. Spy magicians working behind the scenes is one of the wickedest nightmares in the minds of politicians. With old Lab Nine being such a success story, the Kudou family was given the mission of handling the foreign magician operatives running rampant.”

Miyuki pretended to be convinced by that explanation. But it still seemed like questions remained.

“You don’t need to hold back, Miyuki,” prompted Fujibayashi, realizing that as well.

“Thank you. I don’t believe it is very important, but... If the mission was to watch spies who infiltrated Osaka, I was just thinking, wouldn’t it be preferable to establish a base on the western side of Mount Ikoma instead of the eastern?”

For Fujibayashi, that casual question pricked a painful spot.

As she frowned, at a loss for words, the answering baton passed to Tatsuya.

“Being too close presents the danger of being incorporated into all of it.”

“You mean betrayal?!” Miyuki gasped.

“No, only that the politicians thought that way.”

The maze came to an end, and now the front door was visible. The conversation on how politicians viewed magicians ended without being dug into any further.

Retsu Kudou was already waiting in the reception room, although the current time *was* 5:59. Given that Tatsuya’s group wasn’t *actually* late, he had no

intention of apologizing, and he didn't actually feel any diffidence, either.

Faced with a most senior member of Japan's magic world, Tatsuya's mind and body were perfectly normal—

“Thank you very much for making time for us today, sir.”

—so normal that it was Retsu who gave a slight, pained smile at the pure, 100-percent formality.

“It has been a while. We haven't met face-to-face since last summer, have we?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for your advice at the time regarding the Electron Goldworm.”

“Not at all...” Hesitation appeared on Retsu's face, but he overcame it momentarily. “Normally, I would have no obligation to appear before you, but you said you wanted to see me. I am happy we could meet again.”

“I'm much obliged, sir.”

After Tatsuya bowed, Retsu waved a hand to stop Tatsuya before he could continue the diplomatic exchange. “Shiba, you may think it self-satisfied of me, but first I'd like you to allow me to thank you. I thought through and was prepared to do what I did during the Parasidoll incident. As the defeated, I've no intention of making excuses, but nor do I intend to apologize. I do, however, feel sincerely sorry for causing trouble and distress for you.”

Retsu lowered his head deeply—while still sitting on the cushioned reception sofa. Tatsuya and Miyuki watched with unresisting looks; only Minami, who stood waiting behind Miyuki, glared at him with a cool, damp light in her eyes.

“I'm in no position to ask your forgiveness, but I do ask for at least this chance to apologize.”

“General, please raise your head,” answered Tatsuya, his voice *sounding* grateful. “Everyone has their own ideas on what is best. Even I, as young as I am, can understand a simple concept like that. I wasn't able to tolerate what you were trying to do back then, General, but I don't intend to reject your idea itself, that we must develop unmanned magical weapons.”

“...You do me a great service by saying so.” Raising his head, Retsu met Tatsuya’s gaze. They each peered into the other’s eyes.

It was Retsu who resumed the conversation, albeit at a delay. “I’ve heard about your business here from Kyouko,” he said. “The capture of Gongjin Zhou. This is a mission handed down by Maya—by Lady Yotsuba, yes?”

“That’s correct, sir.”

Miyuki had been standing next to Tatsuya, elegantly restrained, but inside, she reeled at the surprise. Sure, it was highly likely that Retsu Kudou knew about their circumstances—but she hadn’t predicted her brother would so easily admit to his connection with Maya.

“Would you happen to know who came to Lady Yotsuba with that request?”

“No, sir. I do not, and I believe it’s not necessary that I know.”

“Then you will accept being a playing piece for the Yotsuba?”

Retsu’s question seemed to test him—actually, it probably *was* a test—and Tatsuya once again said no, his poker face never changing. “*Because I know it was best to keep me in the dark, sir.*”

Seeing that Tatsuya didn’t seem to be bluffing, Retsu breathed a sigh. “I see... Then you even know of *that person.*”

Tatsuya didn’t answer. His attitude said *No comment.*

“It appears Miyuki doesn’t know... No, I apologize. I’ve said something foolish.” Retsu looked at the siblings in turn, then sighed again. “The Ten Master Clans are bound by rules established during the Clans Conference. One of those rules states that, excluding emergency situations, the Clans cannot conspire or cooperate without first going through the Conference.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tatsuya didn’t know the exact rules of the Clans Conference. It was the first time he’d heard of *that* rule, so he only agreed and nodded without giving any critical commentary.

“As a member of the Kudou family, I cannot accept the Yotsuba’s request for help. So in this case, I believe I will accept Tatsuya Shiba’s personal request as

Retsu Kudou.”

““Thank you, sir,”” Tatsuya and Miyuki offered in unison.

For her part, Miyuki gave a modest smile, while Tatsuya’s face was still carefully devoid of emotion.

The meeting with Retsu Kudou ended before even ten minutes had passed, but it had been satisfying for Tatsuya. The whole accepting the request as an individual thing was an empty principle, but he’d gotten the promise that Retsu would ask personal friends for help as well. It was actually beneficial it hadn’t turned into an even longer conversation.

After withdrawing from Retsu’s presence, the three of them were invited by Fujibayashi to eat together. It wasn’t a dinner where they’d mingle with the current head of the Kudou, but a light meal—a show of consideration on her part. Tatsuya gratefully accepted the invitation.

Guided to a casual room among the Kudou estate’s many dining rooms, which seemed to be for children—not in the sense of small children, but a dining room for minors who had been brought together by their parents to deepen relationships with one another—they engaged in a bit of friendly chitchat while waiting for food to be brought in. Then everyone heard soft knocking and turned to look at the door.

“Come in,” called Fujibayashi.

The door opened politely.

“Excuse me. Grandfather told me to ask if I could join you all...”

The one who appeared was a boy about their age. His beautiful face seemed lost.

Minami sucked in her breath at the boy’s unworldly looks. He was so handsome that even Tatsuya couldn’t help but gaze in wonder.

He was utterly fey. In a word, this young man was the archetypal pretty boy.

Tatsuya knew of only one person who possessed a beauty equal to this boy.

And she, Miyuki, the archetypal beauty, stared at her counterpart, at a loss for words.

“Minoru, how long are you going to stand there?”

With a word from Fujibayashi, the fetters binding the young man and Miyuki dissolved.

“Sorry!”

The young man seemed appropriately flustered for his age. He walked over next to Fujibayashi, stopping across the table from Tatsuya and the other two.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” said the boy in a voice that was still somewhat ruffled as he began to introduce himself. “I’m Minoru Kudou, youngest son of the current Kudou head, Makoto Kudou, freshman at Second High. Tatsuya Shiba, Miyuki Shiba, Minami Sakurai—it’s an honor to meet you.”

When he suddenly said her name, Minami’s face reddened. Surprise wasn’t the only thing showing on her face.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Tatsuya Shiba,” said Tatsuya, rising and responding to Minoru’s greeting.

“I’m his younger sister, Miyuki. I see you know who we are, Minoru.”

Without a moment’s delay, Miyuki stood and smiled at Minoru. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki had spoken to Minoru, whom they were just meeting, in a friendly attitude, *as though they harbored no sense of caution whatsoever*.

In contrast to them, Minoru looked like he was sincerely shy about it. With his cheeks red, his almost mystical impression gave way to a more companionable image, but it didn’t change the fact that he was a pretty boy deserving of the prefix *super*.

“I had the pleasure of watching you all during the Nine School Competition. Oh—and please call me Minoru. I’m younger than you, so I would appreciate it if you talked to me informally.”

His looks rivaled Miyuki’s, but his surface personality seemed more normal than hers. He was the youngest child of the current head, so he probably hadn’t been raised for succession and was just a little softer around the edges for it.

“Then I’ll do just that,” said Miyuki, giving him a sweet smile and causing Minoru to avert his eyes in embarrassment.

That was when Minami finally restarted. “I’m terribly sorry!”

With a clatter, Minami stood. It would have been hard to call the act proper manners, but she didn’t currently have the ability to care about that.

“I should have already introduced myself! I am Minami Sakurai. It is quite a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Minoru.”

“Ah, no, it’s fine. But if you can, I’d rather you not call me *lord*...”

Minoru returned Minami’s tense, rigid attitude with an uncomfortable look.

“Sorry about that, Minoru, but this is kind of a habit of hers,” Tatsuya explained. “It’s just her nature. Would you mind overlooking it?”

But now that he’d assumed a humble position toward Tatsuya, this wasn’t something Minoru could strongly insist on.

“Oh. If you insist, I suppose...”

With the young lord willing to compromise, the room calmed down.

In terms of school year, Minoru and Minami were both freshmen in high school, and in terms of age, Miyuki, Minoru, and Minami were all the same—sixteen. However, the conversation between them, despite being of the same age and generation, wasn’t exactly bursting with excitement.

“Minoru... It’s not like this is a formal marriage interview. Don’t be so tense.”



“Huh? I just... Sorry, Kyouko.”

“Minami, you too... You might not be able to open up this suddenly, but you have to relax a little more. If you’re too on edge, it’ll be bad manners.”

“...I’m sorry, Big Sister Miyuki.”

Minoru’s and Minami’s stiffness was going too far and causing the conversation to keep breaking off. The others couldn’t ignore them and continue the pleasant chat, either, creating an air of awkwardness around them.

“Now, don’t say that, Miyuki. Telling a sixteen-year-old girl not to be nervous in front of a member of the opposite sex she’s meeting for the first time is too high a hurdle.”

Still, for Tatsuya, Minoru’s nervousness had acted to dilute the sense of caution he had toward him. Tatsuya jokingly chiding a family member in front of a stranger was a manifestation of that.

“Brother, I am sixteen as well, and this is also my first time meeting Minoru. Do you mean to say that I am not included in that group?”

Miyuki directed a sullen gaze toward her brother. But he insisted, “Well, you’re not *just* any girl—you’re a lady.”

“You make me blush, Brother.” Mood easily brightened, Miyuki put a hand to her rosy cheek and glanced away.

Someone let out a *pfft*.

When he looked over, Minoru was covering his mouth with both hands. When he noticed Tatsuya’s and the others’ eyes on him, his face flushed in embarrassment. Even so, he couldn’t immediately escape the sudden outburst of laughter. After about ten seconds, though, he’d managed to regain his calm.

“I’m terribly sorry...”

Minoru’s apologizing with his face all red was simply adorable, and the hard-to-approach impression brought on by his too-beautiful features had faded into the shadows.

“I’m sorry as well—my brother played a mean joke.”

By pushing all the blame on Tatsuya, Miyuki strove to get things under control. Tatsuya listened with an expression on his face like it didn’t have anything to do with him.

“No, no... You two seem close,” commented Minoru.

“So close, it’s troubling,” broke in Fujibayashi.

Tatsuya took advantage of it. “I don’t recall ever troubling you, Ms. Fujibayashi.”

Minoru gave a slightly more lonely smile than before. “I’m a little, well, envious. My brothers are quite a bit older than me, so I don’t talk to them much. And I don’t have any friends, either.”

“You don’t have any friends at school?” asked Miyuki, her question maybe lacking in consideration somewhat.

“I’ve been frail ever since I was born... I tend to stay home from school a lot.”

Miyuki frowned. But the one who started clearing up the now-uncomfortable mood was Minoru himself. “But I’ve been feeling good this week. Oh, I know! Are you all staying overnight?”

“Yeah. We have lodging nearby.”

“You’re not staying at our house, then...?”

With Minoru giving off the impression of a child left out of a group, Tatsuya wavered on how best to respond. It was a very *cute* reaction, not at all how he’d thought the grandson of Retsu Kudou would behave. He had trouble deciding whether it was an act or not.

As Tatsuya and the others struggled to answer, Fujibayashi threw them a life raft. “Minoru, don’t be unreasonable,” she said. “You have to get to know them better first for that.”

Gently chided by his cousin, whom he loved as an older sister (on the face of it), Minoru nodded and said, “You’re right,” with a stiff smile.

“More importantly, why don’t you give them the tour tomorrow?”

Minoru pounced on Fujibayashi's sudden proposal before Tatsuya and the others could react. "Yes, certainly!"

"Oh, but we don't want to cause trouble for you."

Miyuki knew as well as the others this was probably goodwill without any ulterior motives, but Minoru was someone they'd just met today. When Miyuki tried to reasonably decline, Fujibayashi, the one who suggested it, started trying to persuade her.

"But none of the three of you know the lay of the land here, right? Minoru says he's frail, but that only means he's prone to getting sick. It isn't like he can't go outside, like Mio in the Itsuwa family. He's well-acquainted with places ripe for Traditionalist infiltration, too."

Tatsuya's eyes gleamed.

Their light directed at her, Fujibayashi coolly threw the ball to her cousin. "Isn't that right, Minoru?"

"Yes. For all the time I've spent home from school, I'm confident I know even more about Grandfather's work than my brothers. Shiba—er..."

"I'm fine with Tatsuya."

"And you can call me Miyuki."

Minoru stammered because he'd belatedly realized there were two Shibas here, but Tatsuya and Miyuki immediately picked up on it and told him it was okay to use their first names.

"Please call me Minami."

Even Minami, who wasn't part of that, took advantage of it—something one would call a product of consideration rather than a strong self-assertion.

"Tatsuya, is your job to find the Traditionalists?"

Minoru's expression was a serious one. It certainly didn't look like he'd asked out of curiosity. After all, he, too, was another magician in the Ten Master Clans.

"Pretty much, yeah," he hedged.

“I see.” Minoru didn’t ask after the details. “Then I think I can help you. Kyoto is where the Traditionalists have the most bases, but there are more than a few spots in Nara, too, that are likely essential positions for them. I’ll show them to you tomorrow.”

Tatsuya considered the proposal worth the effort. Meanwhile, Miyuki and Minami were looking mystified, so Fujibayashi decided to unravel the situation.

“The Traditionalists are a single magic society, but they’re not one organization; it’s an alliance of at least ten magician groups. So they all have their own headquarters. You know how when people say Ten Master Clans, it’s actually twenty-eight families and their twenty-eight support clans? It’s the same thing.”

The two nodded in understanding.

By the time Fujibayashi’s explanation had finished, Tatsuya had come to a conclusion as well.

“I will accept your kindness. Thank you, Minoru.”

It would mean wrapping up a sixteen-year-old boy whose power was an unknown quantity in a dangerous mission, but neither Miyuki nor Minami offered any real objections, either.

Miyuki would simply and *sincerely* go along with whatever Tatsuya decided, and Minami had been taught that objecting to her master’s decisions was out of line for a maid.



The next day, Tatsuya and the others checked out of the hotel early in the morning and paid a visit to the Kudou estate again. Their visitation was a light one, having sent their luggage on ahead from the hotel to Nara Station.

Speaking of traveling lightly, Miyuki’s ensemble was unusual in that she was wearing pants. They were made of a sturdy material, more suited for hiking than going out on the town; and up top, too, she wore a long autumn knit sweater instead of a blouse. But if one were to ask if she looked plain, she certainly did not. Both the top and bottom were designs that fit her body type, and without showing any skin, they fiercely appealed to the fact that her face

wasn't the only beautiful thing about her.

Minami, too, seeming to have matched her outfit to Miyuki's, had on a knit sweater and ankle-length pants. The sizing of her clothes, though, left a little bit of room, and girlish cuteness won out over womanliness.

Despite it being only a little after seven, Minoru was waiting for them at the Kudou estate with a look utterly devoid of sleepiness or exhaustion. It seemed he hadn't been putting up a strong front when he said he'd been feeling well.

"Good morning. Have you eaten breakfast yet?"

"Good morning, Minoru."

"We're fine. We ate before we came."

Tatsuya and Minami answered in succession. Seeing a somewhat disappointed look come over Minoru, Miyuki asked, "Minoru, have you not eaten? Were you waiting for us before you ate?"

"No, no, it's fine." Minoru quickly shook his head. "I only figured that if you hadn't, I'd let you eat something here. I'm all ready myself."

"Oh," said Miyuki, smiling in relief.

Minoru, embarrassed, turned red—but that was all. He wasn't entranced by her smile like some, it seemed. "Then please come this way. We have a car ready."

The car the Kudou family had prepared was a limousine. Which was probably normal for this family, though Tatsuya couldn't completely discard the possibility that it was meant to be an aggravating gesture.

The driver was a man in his early old age. He looked a little like Mayumi's bodyguard, whom she had introduced to him before. That man was almost certainly an Extra. *Is this driver one, too?* thought Tatsuya briefly.

He also considered the possibility that Fujibayashi would volunteer to drive, but it seemed even *she* didn't have that much free time. And he wasn't operating on military orders right now, so it would be misplaced to rely on her for support. Getting that far, Tatsuya set the idea aside.

It appeared Minoru saying he was fully prepared was no lie or exaggeration—

the young Kudou followed them right into the limousine. He sat across from Tatsuya, next to Minami. Though Tatsuya and Minoru were facing each other, they had plenty of leg room. As expected, perhaps, of a limousine.

Possibly having rubbed up against something while boarding, a bracelet-shaped multipurpose CAD had become visible inside the right sleeve of the thin jacket Minoru was wearing. It was rare for someone to wear a bracelet CAD on their dominant arm (Tatsuya already knew he was right-handed from their meal yesterday). Miyuki was the one who wondered about it; upon noticing her gaze, Minoru smiled and blushed a little.

“This?” he said, rolling up his right sleeve to expose the CAD, before then rolling up his left sleeve.

He had a CAD around both arms.

“Ninety-nine just isn’t enough... I know I could simply arrange similar activation sequences, but I’ve been having trouble finding a good engineer.”

Multipurpose CADs could store up to ninety-nine activation sequences. And Minoru was saying he couldn’t fit all the spells he could use into two.

“It was really tough to use a CAD in either hand, but thanks to FLT developing a thought-controlled assistance device, things got a lot easier.”

“Minoru, you use one of FLT’s fully thought-controlled CADs?”

“Yes,” he said, this time pulling up the chain around his neck and showing Miyuki the medallion-shaped CAD. “This assistance device is a wonderful product. Taurus Silver, the one who developed it, is no less than a genius,” he said, admiration creeping into his voice.

Miyuki suppressed her joy at this statement with a sociable smile and nod, saying only, “Oh, I see.”

“How much do you all know about the Traditionalists?” Minoru asked them as soon as the limousine started to move.

The vehicle had a clear shield partitioning the cabin and driver’s seat, with microphones to allow them to talk back and forth. The microphones’ lights weren’t on at the moment, but the car did belong to the Kudou family. Their

conversation would probably be overheard.

“Minami and I barely know anything. All we know is what Brother told us before we arrived at your estate.”

Miyuki thought so, at least, so she gave a measured reply. Retsu knew their circumstances, but that didn't mean the Kudou family knew of their connection with the Yotsuba. Since Retsu still maintained a degree of real power in the Kudou family, Miyuki instinctively figured that the things Retsu (the previous head) knew and that his son Makoto (the current head) did not would be limited. And if that was the case, she decided it wouldn't be good for Minoru to probe for where Minami's knowledge had originated.

“I was told a few things by Master Yakumo Kokonoe. He said they were a group of ancient magicians who participated in old Lab Nine but didn't get the results they were after, and that once the institute shut down, their unjustified resentment caused them to band together in an unprincipled alliance despite their varying schools of thought.”

Minoru gave a pained smile; Tatsuya's words were dredged in cynicism and sprinkled with venom. Minoru was neither appalled, nor did he frown. He just smiled. Maybe Minoru was possessed of a more cynical, or perhaps strict, mentality than his appearance would imply.

“You're mostly right.”

And with the way he said *that*, he might truly have been like Tatsuya.

“They call themselves Traditionalists, but magicians who preserve actual traditions would call them heterodox. Maybe they should stop mincing words and just call them the Heretics.”

This wasn't the first time Tatsuya had heard that information, but he kept listening in silence.

“Until modern magic research really got rolling, those who passed down ancient magic hid in the shadows of society. Part of it was to avoid persecution of people with strange abilities, but more than that, it wouldn't have been favorable for those in positions of authority if magic were to go public. After all, magic that doesn't leave any physical evidence is a very good weapon in power

struggles.”

“Deadly curses—a tradition from ancient Heian times. Nowadays they’re commonly accepted in history books. Is there proof that they were real?”

“At the very least, there are records that the ancient magicians participating in old Lab Nine said they were. Not a literal deadly curse, where you could directly stop someone’s biological functions using magic, but there are real records of people using illusions to drive someone to suicide or using remote object control on a knife to make something look like a suicide.”

“...They killed?” asked Minami in a hard voice.

She, too, had experience killing others during her Yotsuba training, but she’d never killed someone defenseless, someone who couldn’t counterattack, from a distance. Miyuki felt a loathing toward it as well; she just didn’t let it show. Only Tatsuya calmly accepted Minoru’s words.

“If the records are true.”

“Minami, it’s not like Minoru killed them. You should know that much.”

Rather than criticize old Lab Nine, Tatsuya reproached his subordinate.

The word *oops* ran across Minami’s face before she immediately bowed to Minoru. “I’m terribly sorry, Lord Minoru.”

“No, I was being insensitive. I didn’t need to talk about that.”

Stiffness remained in his voice, probably because he felt a sense of guilt at the inhumane acts his own family had been involved with, despite him not having been directly related to it. But he had the strength of spirit not to let that entrap him.

“I digress. Before modern magic was established, magic casters would sully their hands with dirty jobs of that sort, but it was by no means all of them. In fact, the ones involved with that dirty work were in the minority. Those who learned magic as part of religious training distanced themselves from both those in power and their agents.”

“Still, there are plenty of examples from before the Tokugawa Shogunate was established of famous temples and shrines having soldiers and wielding worldly

authority themselves.”

Tatsuya’s remark wasn’t really a question, just a problem he posed to move the conversation along.

“Yes. The soldier-monks of Koufuku Temple and Enryaku Temple are well-known for that. However, like you say, after the Tokugawa Shogunate was established, the violent aspects such as those began to be eliminated from orthodox religious groups. You can’t deny, of course, the state of affairs at the time—you can see from the enforcement of sword hunts that powerful political forces wouldn’t allow religious factions to have martial power. But at the same time, you can’t overlook the fact that with the establishment of a stable form of government, they no longer needed that force at all. Looking at the Tokugawa Shogunate’s governance from a modern viewpoint reveals that it was inundated with problems, but it certainly got rid of large-scale conflicts.”

“And those who were eliminated and lost their ‘jobs’ fled underground.”

“That’s right. More than a few of them possessed combat-oriented Buddhist powers. On one hand, you have the casters who cozied up to political power and became its tool, and on the other, you have what we’d call *combat magicians* today, fleeing underground, unable to give up the martial force they’d obtained. Those ones participated in old Lab Nine, and collectively, they were the parent body of those who are now calling themselves Traditionalists.”

Minoru gave a heavy sigh then. It wasn’t an expression of tiredness but rather his contempt escaping him.

“Of course, not all the ancient magicians participating in old Lab Nine did such horrible things—the onmyouji dispatched from the Tsuchimikado and the *ninjutsu* users, for example... I wonder what was different.”

“It was probably whether they’d been trained in controlling their own desires.”

When an answer came back right away to the question he’d murmured, almost talking to himself, Minoru blinked several times. If he’d had a somewhat more normal appearance, the term would have instead been *goggling in astonishment*.

“...I’m sorry. I got off track again. It looks like I’m a little starved for conversations with people my age.”

“I don’t mind. It was more than relevant.”

“Thank you for saying that. Now, how far did I get...? Right, about the Traditionalists’ predecessors.”

Seeing Tatsuya nod, Minoru resumed the conversation’s main thread.

“That’s the background they come from, so their bases today are set up close to the orthodox faction bases they originally belonged to—or maybe I should say *behind* them.”

“They’re near famous temples and shrines, then?”

“Yes—much to the chagrin of earnest men and women of religion.”

Tatsuya and Minoru exchanged glances, smiling thinly. Their smiles were different in nearly every way, with Tatsuya’s a very manly one and Minoru’s beautiful beyond the bounds of gender, but strangely enough, the aura they gave off was similar.

“You’ll all be returning from Nara Station, right?” he asked, his eyes moving away from Tatsuya, where they had been until now, to Miyuki.

“Yes, that’s right,” she answered simply.

“To tell the truth, the biggest Traditionalist base in Nara is a little deeper in than the Kasuga Grand Shrine,” Minoru went on, “but it’s close to Nara Station, so I’ll make that our end point. Let’s go to the Katsuragi area first. In the southern region of Nara, even the Traditionalists are docile, but still...”

“Yeah, just to be safe,” Tatsuya agreed. “Thanks.”

“You can leave it to me.”

The first place Minoru brought them was a promenade called Old Katsuragi Road in Gose, in the southwestern part of the Nara Basin. They passed over Ikaruga on the way for the simple fact that it didn’t have any Traditionalist bases there.

The Old Katsuragi Road was a promenade that you could take a leisurely six-or

seven-hour walk down for sightseeing, but they didn't have any time to spare right now. Minoru instructed the limousine driver to wait at the promenade's exit, then suggested to Tatsuya and the others that they rent stand-up electric robot scooters.

Despite the scooters having automatic controls, you needed a moped license (a term that persisted to this day) for one-person robot scooters or a small motorcycle license for the two-person ones, but unfortunately, neither Miyuki nor Minami had such a thing.

Well, for Miyuki, it was definitely not *unfortunately* but *fortunately*. Tatsuya had a large motorcycle license, and Minoru also had his normal motorcycle license. Which meant, inevitably, that they'd have to rent the two-person ones, the pairings being Tatsuya/Miyuki and Minoru/Minami.

"I'm sorry if I get in your way, Lord Minoru."

"Don't worry about it. All I'm doing is holding the handlebars."

Minami was more apologetic than she'd ever been, but Minoru wasn't worried in the slightest. Still, for a normal male high school student, the situation would seem like quite the perk. While she wasn't as popular as Miyuki, boys who would insist Minami wasn't a beauty herself were definitely in the minority. No matter how amazingly beautiful Minoru was, this would never be unpleasant.

And as for the other pair...

Two-person robot scooters were made for the two people to stand side by side, with the driver holding the handlebars and the passenger normally holding on to a safety bar attached to the vehicle's side.

But Miyuki wasn't gripping the safety bar.

She had her arms around her brother in a happy embrace.

The robot scooter with the Shiba siblings was driving behind Minoru's because of the relatively large width of the vehicles. If one were to posit, then, that Minoru and Minami weren't having to look at this display, it would be a statement proven false. Each time they checked behind or stopped, Minami gave a sigh with an utterly disgusted face. In fact, it was Minoru, seeing the

siblings' bonding for the first time, who sported the poker face.

Setting aside the scenery that was their traveling companions, the search of the Old Katsuragi Road turned up nothing. Still, Minoru had said from the start that the chances were low, so there was no disappointment had by either party. In fact, during their observation of the bases (not their search, because they'd only been probing with magic), though it was only for a short time, they got to experience the refreshing ether of several historical temples and shrines—the Kuhon Temple and the Hitokotonushi and Takamahiko Shrines.

And there was also an unexpected meeting.

"Is that you, Shiba...?"

A young man who appeared to be a Shinto priest apprentice was cleaning the Takagamo Shrine grounds, and he spoke to Tatsuya as they rolled by. With a white *hakama* on, the young man wasn't wearing any glasses, but other than that, his face was in Tatsuya's memories.

"Tsukasa—it's been a long time."

It was Kinoe Tsukasa, former First High student and captain of the kendo club at the time, who had been forced to do an anti-magician group's bidding through brainwashing magic during the Blanche incident last April.

"Oh, you remembered me... Well, I caused you a lot of trouble back then. I really do apologize, including for not giving a real apology at the time."

Kinoe, saying that, lowered his head deeply. His mannerisms were very brisk compared to back then.

"Not at all—you were a victim, too, so..."

At Tatsuya's soothing remark, Kinoe shook his head widely. "I may have fallen under their spell, but my weakness was what they took advantage of. However, I am grateful for your kindness in saying so. Also," he added, in a tone that suggested he had just thought of it, "I'm not a Tsukasa anymore. Mom got a divorce. I'm back to being Kinoe Kamono."

"Is that so? Wait, then, is the reason you're here...?"

"I don't know very much about you, but you really are sharp. About my

eyes?” said Kinoe, pointing to them. “Apparently, they contacted the *main house*, which didn’t even know until then. There were some complications, and now they’re letting me study here.”

Now that he’d heard the circumstances, the story wasn’t all that surprising. Takagamo Shrine was the grand head shrine of Kamo shrines, which were dedicated to the local deity of the Kamo clan. Yakumo had mentioned Kinoe was a collateral relative of the Kamo. Though their connection was token, the Takagamo Shrine—the head family, in a sense—looking after those born into the clan with abnormal abilities, even at the periphery, was not especially strange, given the importance of blood ties in the world of magicians.

“Before making amends, I plan to study here and wash away the impurities within my body.”

“I see. Well, Kamono, I can’t say much that isn’t trite, but I hope things go well.”

“Thanks. At some point, I’ll come to pay you a true apology.”

So saying, Kinoe gave another deep bow, then went back to cleaning the shrine precincts.

So as not to get in his way, Tatsuya, too, left the grounds. Returning to the place where the robot scooter was parked, Miyuki, who hadn’t said anything before now, spoke.

“Wasn’t that nice, Brother?”

“Yeah.”

To be honest, Tatsuya didn’t care much at all about Kinoe. He’d never even thought back on him until meeting him just now. But the sight of a boy, life twisted and warped by magic, making efforts to get back on the straight and narrow instead of cutting his ties with magic altogether, was a breath of fresh air for Tatsuya, who felt magic to be a curse.

After leaving the Old Katsuragi Road, Minoru showed them around Kashihara Shrine first, then the Ishibutai Kofun and Mount Amanokagu. More precisely, he brought them around the Traditionalist bases nearby, but with their search coming up empty-handed, all of them ended up being simple sightseeing

opportunities.

The time was now three in the afternoon. The four of them had come to Nara Park.

“Would there be a magic society base right here in the middle of the city?”

“No—it’s Mount Mikasa. That’s where the Traditionalists’ main large-scale base is: inside.”

“I thought Mount Mikasa was a holy precinct—or rather, that the mountain itself is a *shintai*. Isn’t entry forbidden for everything except pilgrim routes?”

“The Traditionalists probably thought it was a good place for them since people don’t come near it and because the location is sacred. Maybe they believe that as people who pass down *true* magic, they’re worthy of being embraced in the arms of gods and receiving their blessings, or something like that.”

“I’d think if you wanted to hide a tree, you’d put it in a forest... All right, then. Can you show us there?”

At the intersection branching off toward Toudai Temple in one direction and Kasuga Grand Shrine in the other, the four of them got out of the limousine, and with Minoru leading the way, they began heading toward the Mount Kasuga walking paths. Until the first half of the twenty-first century, there was a driveway, too, so you could enter the mountain region in a car, but currently there were only walking paths. This was because of the revival of “reverence” toward the sacred as the technology of magic advanced. Now that something whose existence was previously only wives’ tales and rumors had been proven by science, people had taken back a piousness toward that which *could* exist. It was like an ancient Greek philosopher once explained: It seemed that *knowing* made you deeply aware of what you did *not* know.

At first, their walking order was with Minoru in the lead, Tatsuya and Miyuki behind him, and Minami one step behind them. But around the time they passed the Ukigumo Shrine—a site subordinate to the Kasuga Grand Shrine—Tatsuya and Miyuki ended up in the front.

There was no particular reason for this. If anything, Minoru was just being

considerate of Minami.

“Look—another lovely little shrine,” the sister Shiba stated.

“I can’t *exactly* say that size doesn’t matter,” Tatsuya quipped back, “but as long as it has the necessary form for worshipping a god, it’s a splendid shrine in its own right. Gods don’t have fixed heights or weights, after all.”

“Oh, Brother. Isn’t that a little disrespectful?”

“You think so? I thought I was being sincere in my veneration for the *kami*.”

“Hee-hee. We’ll leave it at that, then.”

The siblings were having a good time chatting as they walked. Plus, the younger sister’s arm was firmly latched onto the older brother’s, meaning the distance between them was inevitably zero. From Minami’s point of view, watching them from behind, *that* was much more of a punishment.

In any case, it was embarrassing to watch. Strangely, she didn’t feel as though it was dissolute or disgraceful, but just watching them made the blood rush to her face and get her heated. Still, she couldn’t leave them. Looking down, she endured it as an act of asceticism.

Minoru, in consideration for how painful this seemed for her, was walking alongside Minami.

“This is another branch shrine of the Kasuga Grand Shrine, right?” Miyuki went on.

Whether or not they were aware of Minami’s state—though the chances that they knew and decided to ignore it were highest—the siblings’ happy chatter never ended.

“Yeah,” Tatsuya agreed. “The deity enshrined at Atago Shrine is Homusubi-no-Kami, who has power and virtue over fire prevention. And Seimei Shrine worships a deification of the first copper ever produced in Japan.”

“The deities enshrined at the Kasuga Grand Shrine are Takemikazuchi-no-mikoto, Futsunushi-no-mikoto, Ame-no-Koyane-no-mikoto, and Himegami, right? ...Come to think of it, aren’t the *kami* enshrined at Yoshida’s family’s house these same four?”

“Well, I think you’re referring to the Yoshida Shrine, but the surname is just a coincidence. Mikihiko’s family isn’t related to it. In fact, his house isn’t even a shrine at all.”

“Oh! Is that right?”

“Yeah. Also, they’re not even a religious corporation. His family’s house is a magic training dojo—a private school.”

“...How embarrassing. I’ve had the wrong idea this entire time. I wish you had told me this sooner, Brother.” Miyuki pouted.

Even as she glared bitterly at him, though, the distance between them didn’t change.

Minami had her face pointed toward the ground and she was desperately reining in the desire to cover her ears. But next to her, Minoru was watching Tatsuya and Miyuki fondly.

The endurance run for Minami ended right before the entrance to the promenade.

Tatsuya stopped abruptly, then lightly shook his left arm, which Miyuki had in hers.

She immediately released his arm.

Tatsuya wasn’t the only one who had sensed something wrong.

A short moment later, a sharp light came into Minoru’s warm eyes as he looked left and right, evidently on his guard.

Today was Sunday. Many sightseers aside from Tatsuya’s group had been around, up to the point that they’d branched off toward the Kasuga Grand Shrine.

As they drew closer to that promenade, there had been fewer and fewer tourists.

And now that they’d arrived at its entrance, nobody, save themselves, was here.

“Mental interference magic—a bounded field,” murmured Tatsuya.

“Is it an enemy?” asked Miyuki sharply, ever cautious, searching for nearby presences. Minami, too, did the same from where she stood beside Minoru.

Tatsuya had probably noticed this a while ago. Minoru, too, seemed to have vaguely sensed something was up.

The strange thing was how neither Miyuki nor Minami had any doubts as to the unnatural decrease in people. Especially Miyuki. She was a world-class user of mental interference magic, so she possessed a strong resistance to mind-based attacks.

It was Minoru who answered that question.

“It seems to be a high-level bounded field caster. They must have kept their magic output to the bare minimum, riding the line so we wouldn’t notice until too late.”

With instantly effective spells being the norm in modern magic, ideas about not letting people know you were using magic were few and far between. At most, they’d developed delayed-activation spells where you could control the spell’s activation timing; techniques to hide already-activated spells existed only as a personal trait.

If they were up against high-power magic, Miyuki would be able to nullify it using a larger event-influencing force. With this, though, she’d been very gradually placed under a weak mental guidance, leading her to fall under the spell without even thinking about resisting it.

“Seems techniques like this are in abundance in ancient magic,” said Tatsuya under his breath.

“Unlike us modern magicians, who treat the ability to use a myriad of spells to deal with a wide variety of situations as important, ancient magicians tend to value casters who excel in a specific spell.”

“Guess that means secondary skills to use alongside that specific spell have advanced.”

Many parts of Minoru’s knowledge were proving useful to Tatsuya in different ways. The old Lab Nine information about ancient magic felt like an especially fresh viewpoint, having a different tone than the info on orthodox spells he’d

heard from Yakumo and Mikihiko. Tatsuya personally would have liked to have more varied discussions with him to acquire more of his knowledge, but unfortunately, he didn't have the time for that right now.

"Still, I bet you catching on this quickly wasn't something they'd calculated for, Tatsuya."

Right after Minoru said that, auras behind the trees rippled and swayed.

"It seems they're quite confident in their invisibility."

Minoru was saying this out loud in order to provoke the enemies surrounding them.

Either they were impatient types, or they decided staying hidden any longer wouldn't mean much.

"Minami!"

"Understood!"

Minami erected a barrier at Tatsuya's command—and at the same time, a silvery light flashed off its surface.

The glow, which the defensive wall repelled, had come from what appeared to resemble a thick needle, or possibly a superthin arrow. It was a metal dart bullet—a *fléchette*—fired using magic.

Assuming a posture in which she, too, could deploy a defensive spell at any time, Miyuki scouted for the shooter's location. But by the time she'd pinpointed him, Tatsuya had already swung around to the other side of the trees.

A series of screams. Cries of anguish at their bodies being bored through by Tatsuya's partial dismantling.

Miyuki decided she could leave that side to her brother. Instead, she prepared for a spell coming from the opposite direction.

Psions shimmered, and the signs of magic activation appeared over the young women's heads. It was lightning spirit magic, one Miyuki had seen many times, the kind Mikihiko excelled in. But they disappeared in an instant—thanks to Program Demolition, Tatsuya's specialty information body—dismantling

countermeasure.

“Brother, we’re fine over here!”

As if to back up her words, Miyuki deployed Area Interference. In order to stay out of the way of Minami’s and Minoru’s spells, she first activated it in a narrow cylinder around her alone. The pillar-shaped field stretched above, slowly widening at a height that wouldn’t get in anyone’s way. Aiming down, she gathered power in a horizontal circle just below the ground. In less than a second, a gigantic cocktail glass-shaped Area Interference field had formed, one that wouldn’t allow any magical attacks from the air *or* from underground through.

“Amazing... It’s like a grail,” breathed Minoru in wondering admiration.

But he, too, wasn’t just appreciating Miyuki’s magic. Leaving her and Minami’s side, he started *walking* in the opposite direction from the screams that were their assailants being shot by Tatsuya.

At first, Minami tried to stop him; if he was moving swiftly to their flank, that would be one thing—but she thought walking slowly to them was like asking them to make him a target.

But Miyuki stopped her. When Minami tried to raise her voice, Miyuki grabbed her arm, then shook her head slowly enough to be inconspicuous, telling her she didn’t need to.

Minami immediately understood why.

The enemy’s force apparently consisted of two kinds of casters. Some were ancient magicians who were *unbound by tradition* and incorporated the concept of modern magic’s weaponized CADs into their fighting styles and were firing physical weapons called fléchettes propelled by magic. The others were ancient magicians who stuck to tradition and used bounded fields—mental interference magic for consciousness-manipulation—and were currently throwing out attacks using SB magic, magic that utilized independent information bodies.

Tatsuya was intercepting the former, while Minoru was going after the latter hidden magicians. The enemy didn’t seem to understand what he was doing,

either. But a moment later, their violent attacks converged on him. Perhaps they'd realized he was one of the Kudou bloodline they so detested—they had completely forgotten about the girls.

But not one of their spells hit him. Spells that created wind, fire, and sound pierced through Minoru and dissipated without leaving any damage, while spells that would directly deal external and internal injuries all failed because of a lack of a target to affect.

“An...illusion? Unbelievable...”

Minami's murmur was no exaggeration. While not up to Tatsuya's level, magicians perceived psions at the same time as physical light and sound. Minoru's body, in Minami's eyes, had the exact same psionic pattern as his true body, which had just been walking next to her.

In other words, if you used magical senses, the person would definitely be right there.

“Parade. It's a secret technique of the Kudou family that incorporates elements of *ninjutsu*.”

Miyuki's voice trembled with an apprehension that trumped her words of praise.

“Still, it's amazing... Why, he's using it more precisely than Lina!”

“When you say Lina, do you mean Angie Sirius, commander of the USNA's Stars?”

“Yes. Angie Sirius, also known as Angelina Kudou Shields. We were calling her Lina. She was kind and sweet in ways unlike a soldier, but her skill in magic was worthy of the Stars' commander. But Minoru is beating her in technique. At least, in terms of Parade. I had no idea the Kudou family had such a treasure.”



How would Minoru feel when he heard Miyuki's impressions? Would he have told her he was honored? Would he have been embarrassed and said he still had a long way to go? Or would he have been modest, saying *he* was certainly no treasure? Perhaps he would have been shocked at her new caution directed toward him, despite him volunteering to show them around out of pure goodwill and how he had zero intention of being her enemy.

Thankfully, though, he hadn't heard the female Shiba's voice. His mind was 100 percent focused on neutralizing the enemy.

An activation sequence expanded from Minoru's right hand and was absorbed in an instant. He hadn't pressed a button because he was using a fully thought-controlled device; once you understood that, nothing about it was surprising. The noteworthy thing was the speed he read in the activation sequence. Even a modest estimation of that speed would have placed him on the same level as Mayumi Saegusa, former First High student council president...

But it was still too early to be surprised.

In no time at all, after receiving the impact of the activation sequence's processing speed, Minoru's magic fired off.

The ground began to glow, starting from a step in front of him. The emission-type spell Spark. It was a basic emission-type spell that forcibly extracted electrons from matter and caused an electric discharge, but normally it targeted air particles in a very restricted scope. While ionization occurred with relative ease in the natural world, because this spell interfered with the structure of matter and altered it, it required a high level of event interference. The most that many magicians could do was cause the ionization in an extremely limited target area with low density, meaning few particles in a certain volume.

And he'd activated it on the entire surface layer, in their entire vision. This was wider than the discharge area of Slithering Thunders, the combination spell Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori, former chairman of the First High club committee, specialized in—despite his Slithering Thunders having a higher degree of difficulty as a spell, considering it used static electricity from friction for the discharge along with other factors.

He's better than Hattori and on the same level as Saegusa?!

Miyuki was so taken aback by the sight that she forgot to even fire supporting magic.

Even Tatsuya, who had disabled half—or perhaps one *half circle*—of the magicians surrounding them, was watching Minoru’s magic in awe.

Like Miyuki, he was, of course, impressed that he’d applied Spark, which needed strong event influence, to this *many* targets. But what he was really attentive to was how this wide-range Spark was only a preparation to let him smoke out his prey.

A normal magician, or even a first-class one, would use spells whose activation could fail due to a lack of influence as a sacrifice. The fact that Minoru was possessed of magic power corresponding to what was in a way an extravagant tactic had been immediately proven with Tatsuya watching.

To block the electric current crawling up from his feet, an enemy magician used a defensive spell. He’d probably prepared a conditionally triggered spell in advance because even with modern magic using CADs, perceiving an attack before triggering a spell was too tough to time. Most likely it was an SB magic spell that used a one-time synthetic spirit to cause an event alteration that would cancel out whatever magic-based phenomenon the caster perceived. Tatsuya speculated that it was an ancient magic spell called *Tsuina-jutsu*, a technique to drive out evil spirits.

In this case, the spell the opponent had used wasn’t the important part.

Because a spell had gone off automatically—in other words, he’d used a spell without meaning to—the spell that was hiding his location, Invisibility, was turned off for that moment. Now Tatsuya could easily tell where the enemy was hidden even *without* using Elemental Sight the way he had been. Miyuki and Minami could probably both see them, too. And naturally, so would Minoru, the one who had contrived the act.

Minoru used his left hand to expand an activation sequence, which was then absorbed into his arm—clearly, he had nearly mastered the fully thought-controlled CAD. As a developer, this was a joyous thing for Tatsuya, but when he considered how it hadn’t even been two months since it had hit the markets, he couldn’t help feeling an unfathomable anxiety about Minoru’s magical sense.

An electric current flowed where Minoru pointed. It neither produced light nor the sound of dielectric breakdown, but Tatsuya was using an ability to perceive information bodies, and he could see what had happened. Minoru's spell had created a state that was the same as if he'd interfered with the enemy caster's internal electric current and caused another current to flow into him from outside.

The soft sound of a person falling down reached Tatsuya's ears—the result of the magician who took Minoru's attack losing his freedom of movement because of the *electric shock*.

The magician's body was protected from others' magic with an unconsciously deployed Information Boost barrier. It didn't matter that he was an ancient magician. Minoru had easily broken through that barrier and directly applied magic to him.

Even Masaki Ichijou would have trouble instantly breaking through an Information Boost barrier with any spell except for his vaunted Burst. Tatsuya hadn't exactly seen it with his own two eyes, but he knew about it from the detailed combat reports about the Yokohama Incident.

Maybe Minoru was especially good at emission-type magic, which interfered with electricity—with the motion and distribution of electrons. If Tatsuya considered it to be Minoru's forte, he couldn't say for certain whether his event influence surpassed Masaki's. But on the other hand, Minoru had mastered Parade, a spell that blended ancient and modern magic, which meant that he had the skills to rival Masaki Ichijou even in modern magic.

Where Minoru's *illusion* pointed, people fell, one after another.

The enemy attacks couldn't find his true body.

Then, perhaps finally realizing the sheer power differential, one of the magicians appeared from the shadows he was hiding in.

It wasn't to surrender—he had a paper talisman ready. And if he'd purposely shown himself, then it wasn't to run away, either. He was poised to sally out with an all-or-nothing—or rather, a do-or-die attack.

Minoru's eyes naturally moved toward the man.

It would be cruel to call it a mistake. Because he was prone to sickness, his talents were top-top-tier, but he hadn't been blessed with many opportunities in real combat.

Minoru's spell took down the caster holding the talisman.

At about the same time, a small figure burst out from the brush just beside him—and by nature, just beside Miyuki.

It wasn't a magician. It was much smaller and sharper than a human—a four-legged beast.

"A pipe fox?!" Minami yelped.

If the exclamation was a warning, it was too late. The small beast was clearly out for blood, and it was about to jump right at the Shiba sister.

Miyuki watched the beast trying to attack her without even blinking.

Minami was the one who acted instantly. "Lady Miyuki!"

Having sensed the circumvention of the anti-matter shield she'd had up, she jumped into action—the action of hanging over Miyuki to shield her.

Even so, Miyuki was taller than her. For Minami to cover her, she'd have to jump into her and knock her down.

Miyuki, who had never once considered the possibility Minami would ever pull something like that, helplessly toppled backward.

"Miyuki!"

Even Tatsuya shouted in haste at that. But he quickly regained his calm.

Minami, who had frantically turned around with Miyuki underneath her, froze when she saw something unexpected.

She looked on as a small, long-bodied creature rolled, very literally frozen, across the ground.

"Owww... Minami, would you please move?"

Minami hurriedly stood up at the voice coming from under her. There was no anger in Miyuki's voice whatsoever, but Minami was on the verge of panic.

“I should have known, Miyuki. Your reaction was brilliant.”

When Tatsuya walked over to them, he offered his sister a hand up.

Happily taking it, Miyuki rose with a motion that felt almost weightless.

“I am *your* little sister. It’s only natural I can do this much.”

Neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki seemed to be looking at Minami, who was about to faint from nervousness.

Meanwhile, Minoru disabled the remaining enemies.

Tatsuya went away from the rest of the group to search through the pockets of the magicians he’d defeated. Their possessions, though, were little help in determining their identities. But he really hadn’t been expecting any help there, so he didn’t come away disappointed. With an innocent look, he went back to Miyuki and Minami.

The two of them had been repeating the same exchange over and over: *I’m sorry, I’m sorry... It’s fine; don’t worry about it— I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry... It’s really fine; don’t worry about it anymore.* Deciding it would take a little more time for Minami to calm down, he looked over to Minoru, who was walking their way. He was about to show his appreciation, but Minoru addressed him before even that:

“That was amazing, Tatsuya. I can’t believe you cleaned up all those enemies in such a short time.”

Even Tatsuya struggled to keep the pained grin off his face for this one. “No, you were the one who stole the show. I essentially ambushed them, but you went straight for the hidden enemies and overwhelmed them.”

“I was the one who launched the surprise attack. You know about Parade, don’t you?”

“Yeah. And I’m curious as to how you know that I know about Parade.”

“That’s a secret,” answered Minoru simply, giving a smile without an ounce of malevolence in it.

Tatsuya had known this already, but once again, he thought about how Minoru, despite his angelic face, had quite a “personality.”

If someone had heard his thoughts, they would have probably showered him with criticism—*you're one to talk!* Before the conversation could fall into an infinite loop of complimenting and modesty, he changed the subject.

“By the way, how much longer is it to the Traditionalists’ base from here? We didn’t spend much time on this battle, but if they ambushed us here, that means they knew we were heading toward their hideout. I doubt any clues will be left by the time we get there.”

“Indeed. And we can’t leave them here, either.”

“Brother, would it not be wise to leave soon? We still have time before our train, but if we stay here overlong, people will notice.”

Miyuki wasn’t exactly envious of the “friendly” conversation Tatsuya and Minoru were having, but she did urge caution.

“Right. Let’s call it quits for today.”

“Oh—then I’ll keep watch here... Also, and this may be none of my business, but when is your return train arriving?”

“Seven thirty, so we still have three hours.”

Tatsuya and the others had come here planning to spend more time on the search, so they’d gotten a relatively late time on their return ticket, too. (Incidentally, tickets still existed in this day and age.)

“Then how would a hot spring sound?”

“A hot spring...?”

Miyuki, who had been listening in on Tatsuya and Minoru’s conversation, frowned dubiously. Next to her, Minami furtively—to her, but plain as day to anyone else—tugged at her collar and checked for body odor.

The meaning behind it was clear. Minoru, having just stepped on a landmine in all women’s hearts—or thinking as much—panicked.

“N-no, I don’t mean you’re dirty, or smelly, or anything like that...”

Miyuki turned a piercingly cold glare on Minoru.

His entire body went stiff. The way he’d steeled himself for a direct

confrontation earlier was completely gone.

Tatsuya, realizing he'd have to be the one plucking the chestnuts from the flames, inwardly sighed. "Minoru, you just blew yourself up," he explained, putting a firm end to things before Minoru could unintentionally spread the damage any further. "Miyuki, Minami, you two need to calm down. He only suggested a hot spring as a way to soothe the exhaustion from the battle." His tone to them was strong, leaving the dumbfounded boy on the sidelines. "It doesn't sound like a bad idea to me. What about you?"

"...If you say so, Brother."

Miyuki seemed like she wasn't completely convinced, but on the other hand, as she nodded, her eyes glittered in anticipation, maybe drawn to the idea of what all it would entail.

Beside her, Minami pressed her right hand to her sweater collar in embarrassment.

The hot spring Minoru led them to was in a long-established hotel in a location not far from the Heijou-kyou Capital Area. He *led* them there rather than *directed* them to it because despite his reasonable assertion that they should leave someone involved at the scene, Tatsuya had brought him along against his will.

In other words, it turned out that Minoru was surprisingly weak to pressure.

If the boy hadn't been with them, Tatsuya probably would have been dragged into the family bath by Miyuki. He couldn't say he was against it, but he wouldn't stand for leaving Minami alone in a place like this.

And he had something he wanted to ask Minoru, too.

That was why, going into a hotel renowned for its natural hot spring, the two men had instead shut themselves up in a guest room, a low table between them as they faced each other.

"...Was the pipe fox what you wanted to ask about, Tatsuya?"

"I'm surprised. Your insight is incredible."

Tatsuya was being fairly serious in his compliment, but Minoru seemed to

take it as flattery. “Not at all—I couldn’t remember mentioning anything else that seemed to draw your interest.”

Tatsuya had been trying to praise him for those exact sharp wits, but it wasn’t something he felt the need to repeat. He decided to get to the point. “What is it, exactly? The beast had a perfectly physical body, but I’ve never heard of nor seen a fox-like creature like that. And if it was a regular animal, it wouldn’t have gotten through Minami’s anti-matter barrier.”

Minoru’s eyes appeared to waver. But it lasted only a moment. “Tatsuya, you know of the parasites, right?”

“Yeah. You do, too?”

“Yes. To put it simply, pipe foxes are familiars made with the same principles.”

“The same principles...? By embedding an isolated information body in an animal?”

“Yes. By extracting an animal’s information bodies at the moment of its death, making it into a synthetic spirit, then embedding it into a young body of the same species, you create a familiar—an animal with magical abilities. I hear it was a surprisingly popular technique in ancient magic.”

“Was that pipe fox a familiar created in the same way?”

“Yes. But that isn’t what you really wanted to ask, was it?”

Minoru let a strange, nonhuman air drift from him. Not because he had a parasite within him or anything. Minoru predicted that Tatsuya was going to pepper him with questions about parasite cultivation methods, and so he’d steeled himself—for the misunderstanding that they’d offered humans as sacrifice to cause the parasites to multiply. The feeling of tension made his incredible features look even more otherworldly.

But Tatsuya hadn’t intended to do anything like that. Besides, he was *used to inhuman beauty*, so he didn’t feel particularly pressured. “No, that’s enough for now.”

Caught off guard, the strange air vanished from Minoru’s face. In an innocent voice, he chuckled. “...S-sorry.”

He tried to stop himself, but the outburst of laughter overwhelmed him. He'd been hooked.

"Tatsuya—you're, how do I put this, a very *deep* person. I think I can tell why Grandfather is so interested in you."

"I'm just an average person, you know."

Average as a person anyway, thought Tatsuya, and as if to object to that thought, Minoru's accidental laughing continued.

After being shown to their rooms, Miyuki and Minami had gone straight to the large public bath, which meant Tatsuya didn't need to hide the info about the pipe fox from her. Tatsuya hadn't exactly instructed his sister to leave, but Miyuki was just being too suspicious about it all.

But ultimately, this was the right choice. After all, now she was taking a leisurely dip in the hot spring, which felt even better than she'd expected.

The bath was fairly crowded. In this age, it was normal never to expose your naked body in front of others. Booths to wash yourself were individually partitioned, and you would wear a *yugi*, a garment meant for wearing in a public hot spring. The ones here were fairly modest—meaning they showed little skin—as expected from a long-established *ryokan*. Still, Miyuki drew attention.

It wasn't a mixed bath, so it was only members of the same sex. Most of them were older, too—and there were some elderly ladies as well. Even so, when Miyuki appeared at the side of the tub, all the bathers looked at her at once. Such silence came over the room that time could have stopped.

A white foot softly entered the bathwater. Someone, somewhere, let out a sigh, and time started moving again.

Miyuki slowly slipped in. Clinging to her skin before, her *yugi* billowed out. Almost like an angel, thought more than a few people.

She exhaled alluringly at how good it felt. Instead of a sigh, there was an intake of breath.

Small waves rippled out over the water's surface. Two people, who looked

over twenty years old, had stood up in a fluster and left the room. Despite not having invited anyone else, one person, then another also rose from the water. The next thing Miyuki knew, the bathing room was essentially rented out for her and Minami's private use.

"I wonder what on earth that was all about...?" murmured Miyuki.

Next to her, Minami sighed covertly. She understood exactly how they felt. To be honest, she didn't want to bathe with Miyuki, either. She'd inadvertently realized it when they'd met up next to the bathtub. It would be one thing if Miyuki just made you feel inferior as a woman—but with her shaking your very identity as a woman, anyone would probably want to run away.

Minami began to have concerns, though misdirected, about whether this constituted an obstruction of business...

"Well, that's all right. Now we can take our time."

Minami, though extremely reluctantly, agreed with her assessment. With everyone watching the ice princess, they'd end up seeing Minami as well, since she was next to her. Unlike Miyuki, she wasn't used to being watched. She was certainly attractive enough in her own right, but she didn't possess the kind of intense features that would steal not only the attentions of the opposite sex but that of the same sex as well.

"Ahhh, this is nice..."

Beside her, Miyuki let out a sigh.

Minami gave a start—no, a shudder.

"Oh? What's wrong, Minami? Are you cold? ...Maybe the water *is* a bit lukewarm."

She wasn't cold. Just the opposite—her body was heating up.

"You should get in deeper. It's not actually that good for your body, but just until it warms you up."

That was a misunderstanding. She wanted to get out of the water as soon as possible. But when Miyuki placed a hand on her shoulder, for some reason, she couldn't fight it. It was just a gentle press, but Minami's body sank into the tub.

Seeing Minami going down to her shoulders like she told her to, Miyuki smiled sweetly, satisfied. Minami's mind shook. And that was not because of any bath-dizziness or weariness.

When Minami emerged from the hot spring with a strangely exhausted look on her face while accompanied by a completely refreshed Miyuki, Tatsuya cocked his head at them in puzzlement before they finally departed the hotel. Their stay had actually come with dinner, but they didn't have quite enough time for that.

As they got out of the limousine in front of the station, Minoru glanced at them as though reluctant to part.

"...Goodbye, then. I had fun today," he said, making it clear that he wasn't only saying that to be polite.



“You were a big help to us, too,” answered Tatsuya, speaking for all three of them.

This time, Minoru gave them a puppy-dog look—an expression that would have made any lady of a marriageable age lose her mind. “Will we be able to see each other again?”

“Our *business* isn’t over, so we’ll be revisiting in the near future. I think we’ll ask for your help again when that happens.”

“Yes, by all means! Ask anything you want, and I’ll help with it as long as I’m able.”

“Thanks. All right, *till next time.*”

“Yes! I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Using a promise of reunion instead of more formal parting phrases, Tatsuya and the others said their goodbyes.



After returning to Tokyo, the trio ate out for dinner and then went home. Once he was back in his room, Tatsuya quickly realized he had a message waiting, asking him to return a call—and not on the house’s terminal, but on his personal one.

It was Fujibayashi.

Reflecting on how often he was contacting her, he dialed her private number.

“*Oh, Tatsuya? Welcome home.*”

It felt weird for someone on the other end of the call to say *welcome home*. Even today, when he could see her face on the video call.

“I’m sorry for my lateness, Fujibayashi. Are you still at the Kudou estate?”

Especially with her being in the place he’d visited before.

“*Yes—how did you know?*”

“Just a hunch.”

“*Really, now? I thought for sure you were hacking my locational data.*”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the skills you do. Anyway, would you happen to be calling about the thing that happened today?”

“Yes—*that thing*.” Thinking his caution cute, the lady smiled. “*The people who attacked you this afternoon.*”

He didn’t complain about her spelling it out. Fujibayashi not caring about the act of eavesdropping was a guarantee of the line’s security. “Did you find out who they were?”

“Yes, though I’m sure you already know.”

“Traditionalist ancient magicians?”

“Well, it’s not a hard guess to make, I suppose,” she said, sounding bored.

“But that isn’t the last of it, right?” asked Tatsuya with confidence—implying if that was all she had, she wouldn’t have called in the first place.

“I suppose not. Make no mistake, we know for sure your attackers were a Traditionalist unit. But there were defected Taoists from the mainland among them.” Fujibayashi frowned particularly strongly for some reason. “Some were the Taoists the Kudou family had been protecting for the Parasidoll development. We knew they’d run to the Traditionalists, but not that they’d show up in a place like that.”

“Wasn’t that something you’d predicted?”

“Well, yes, but...” Fujibayashi nodded, her face sour at Tatsuya’s remark. “*Inviting magicians into our camp with a high chance of turning into enemies, then having them sabotage us just like we feared, and then even letting them make a clean getaway... And to make matters worse, letting them be involved in an attack on not only civilians, but minors... It makes me wonder what on earth the Kudou family is even doing.*”

“Your point about us being minors aside, I can’t sincerely claim we’re *civilians*, but I digress. Minoru was attacked, too, so I, at least, don’t have any intention of blaming the Kudou for it.”

“I see... Can’t do anything about it now, I guess.” Fujibayashi shook her head a little. By doing so, she changed the mood; then she ran a comb through her

disheveled hair. *“The reason I wanted you to call me was so I could apologize for another matter.”*

“Apologize to me?”

“Yes. I really should have been the one to call you, but I didn’t know when that would be.”

“I don’t mind that at all. Did something happen you needed to apologize for?”

Tatsuya wasn’t playing dumb—he didn’t actually know what she meant. Fujibayashi looked very uncomfortable, so *something* bad must have happened, but he didn’t have a clue what.

“It’s regarding the attack today. It was firmly under the intelligence department’s jurisdiction.”

Suddenly, Fujibayashi’s tone changed into that of a formal soldier.

“I see, *Lieutenant*. How might that be related to me, then?”

Erasing her expression—trying hard to make a poker face—Fujibayashi answered, *“What this means is that the 101st Brigade cannot intervene in this matter. It goes without saying that the Independent Magic Battalion can’t, either.”*

But unfortunately, her voice wasn’t included in that “poker face.”

“I’m sorry, Tatsuya,” she said, seeming sincerely ashamed. *“We’ve done nothing but take advantage of you lately, and now we can’t help in your time of need.”*

Still, Tatsuya couldn’t quite understand what she was so worried about. “I don’t believe this is something you need to be concerned about, ma’am. And in terms of taking advantage of me—well, I’ve used your help on numerous occasions as well.”

“No, the situation is different than what it has been. This time, they’re after you personally.”

“That’s neither your fault nor the major’s, ma’am. In fact, if that’s the reason, then I couldn’t bring myself to cause trouble for the unit.”

Unease appeared on Fujibayashi's face. To her, it felt like he was saying that his own bodily safety didn't matter.

"Look..." she said, her tone reverting from Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi to just Fujibayashi. *"Can't you ask for Yakumo-sensei's help?"*

Tatsuya looked back dubiously at his commander on the screen. "I already have. I'm having him secretly keep watch over my friends from school and their families."

"No, not that." Fujibayashi looked more than impatient now—she seemed a little annoyed. *"Why not ask him for a bodyguard for you personally? And if you don't want someone protecting you, then at least Miyuki or Minami."*

And, in truth, she *was* a bit annoyed with Tatsuya for not understanding her.

"You may have forgotten, Lieutenant Fujibayashi, but Miyuki already has a bodyguard. That role belongs to me and Minami, ma'am."

When Fujibayashi tried to sputter out something more, Tatsuya cut her off with his eyes from across the camera. "And I don't plan on involving Master any further in this, either."

"Why not?" she asked, a little calm back in her voice.

"Master's connection to both the Kudou and the Traditionalists runs too deep, ma'am. If he gets any more involved, at worst, it's possible his fellow *ninjutsu* users may also begin to move. Even Mount Hiei might act. At that point, it would essentially start an internal conflict. Even the Clans Conference might not be able to calm things down."

She must not have thought of that possibility. While she was at a loss for an argument, Tatsuya kept talking to shut down any preemptively.

"If that happens, it will only give a bigger opening for whoever's behind Gongjin Zhou."

"...You're saying someone's pulling the strings?"

"That would be more natural, wouldn't it, ma'am?" he pointed out.

On the other side of the screen, Fujibayashi mulled something over for a bit. *"Right. The leader of an organization will only march to the field if his*

maneuverings have reached their final phase or if they've been driven to the brink of destruction... You think Gongjin Zhou isn't the mastermind himself, don't you?"

"If he was the mastermind, this would be easy. We'd just have to find him and finish him. The issue is the possibilities. I believe it would be foolish to put everything else at risk just to lower the risk to myself, ma'am."

"I'd think it's only natural for a person to prioritize his own safety..."

"Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi."

She cast her gaze downward at the criticism in his voice. *"...All right. But if you ever feel as though you're seriously in danger, make sure to contact me. Military regulations do allow personnel the right to act in order to protect their own lives."*

"Understood, ma'am."

Tatsuya got up and responded with a salute. It wasn't particularly sarcastic—it was to set Fujibayashi's mind at ease by telling her he would act as a member of their unit should it come to that.



The day after Tatsuya and the others returned from Nara, there was a new development in the search for Gongjin Zhou—but it hadn't come about due to the Shiba family, nor the Kudou, nor the Kuroba, nor the Ninefold Temple, nor First High.

Instead, it had occurred within a high-class residential area in the heart of Tokyo. On those plush streets stood a mansion, blending in with the others, just as *equally* luxurious as those around it. Its owner, Kouichi Saegusa, had called to his study Saburou Nakura, his eldest daughter's bodyguard and his current confidant.

"Do you remember a boy named Tatsuya Shiba?" he asked him after a half-baked greeting.

"An underclassman and friend of Lady Mayumi's when she was in high school, correct?" he responded, in the most inoffensive way possible. Like his master, he remembered things other than that, of course, but he didn't say them aloud.

Kouichi's eyes turned onto Nakura. Because of those *other things*, the answer wasn't a satisfactory one, but he didn't vocally criticize him on that point. "That junior of Mayumi's has made contact with the Kuroba twins."

"The twins who attracted so much attention in this year's Nines? The Yotsuba seem like they're trying to steer the focus of those related to magic away from something by concentrating the spotlight on those siblings."

"Something, eh..."

Kouichi's tone made it sound like he knew, at the very least, what it was they were attempting to hide, but he didn't say out loud what exactly that was.

"The Kuroba siblings visited Tatsuya Shiba's house two weeks ago. And

yesterday and the day before, Tatsuya Shiba visited the Kudou family. He apparently had a meeting with Sensei.”

“A personal talk with Retsu Kudou? That certainly doesn’t happen every day.”

Once again, Kouichi rolled his eyes to glare at him. “Nakura, cease your posturing.” This time, he did more than just give the man a look. “The Yotsuba have contacted Sensei through the Kuroba children. They cannot have any reason to request the Kudou’s assistance besides the incident the other day.”

Kouichi was aware of how the Kuroba team had let Gongjin Zhou slip away from capture in Yokohama Chinatown.

And the one who had reported that to him was Nakura.

Nakura hadn’t pointed out that the one who contacted the Kudou family was Tatsuya Shiba and not the Kuroba siblings. He knew, though Kouichi had never directly told him, what his master guessed was the relationship between the Yotsuba and Tatsuya Shiba.

“No matter how skilled the man may be, he cannot escape from the Yotsuba now that they have help from the Kudou.”

The man Kouichi referred to was Gongjin Zhou. At this point, Nakura figured Kouichi, who believed the Kudou and Yotsuba to have joined forces to search for him, was overthinking things. He had the evidence and factors to back it up, too. But he didn’t say that to Kouichi.

“I don’t mind if the Yotsuba kill him. But were they to capture him, it would almost certainly cause problems for this family.”

Without a word, Nakura bowed, expressing his agreement.

“We must not allow the Yotsuba to learn of the Saegusa’s connection to Zhou.”

On this point, Nakura’s thoughts differed from his master. He was sure the Yotsuba already knew they were accommodating the fugitive.

They probably had no proof, but the Yotsuba, and the Kuroba under their umbrella, didn’t need evidence—the Yotsuba lived in the shadows of society, same as the Saegusa. They thought differently than Kouichi, who liked to play

with fire behind the scenes, though he ultimately didn't live there. That was what Nakura thought, but because they were from different worlds, he'd decided he wouldn't be able to convince his master verbally.

That was why he ultimately remained silent.

"You know where Zhou is, right?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but even I don't currently know his location..."

Rage flashed onto Kouichi's face.

Just before his master flew into a fit, Nakura finished his suspended remarks. "But I have a means of contacting him. I should be able to summon him here, too."

Kouichi bit down and ground his teeth. He felt like Nakura had just played him. A moment later, though, he brushed it aside and regained his calm. His natural tendencies aside, he hadn't come through so many hardships empty-handed.

"Then call him. And put an end to him."

"Yes, of course."

Nakura had no equivocations about agreeing to the order to kill someone. That was what he'd always been good at. Before gaining employment with the Saegusa, he'd worked a job not too different from that of a killer.

"If you need support, you can take as much as you want. No need to worry about home security."

"No, I will be enough on my own."

The flat response could either be taken as confidence or arrogance, and Kouichi frowned slightly. "He has the skill to break out of a Kuroba encirclement. And I believe you were the one who reported that to me, yes?"

Nakura maintained his expression even at that remark. "That's exactly why. Forgive my rudeness, but the proficiency of those in this family would only lead to them dying pointlessly. I believe they'd be a hindrance, in fact."

The comment was a scathing one, but no anger appeared on the man's face.

“All right. Feel free to do things your way.”

“I thank you.” Nakura bowed respectfully, even to the seemingly offhand order.

“Oh, and keep guarding Mayumi as you usually do.”

“Of course,” he answered, head still lowered, before leaving the study without meeting Kouichi’s gaze.



Tatsuya hadn’t obtained any concrete results regarding the search for Gongjin Zhou during his visit to Nara, but he’d met with an elder in Japan’s magic world who—though having declared his retirement—still possessed a lot of influence, and he’d gotten his cooperation.

A large group of magicians had attacked them with an ambush, but they’d turned the tables and captured them. The intelligence department had snatched them away, but it wouldn’t be that much of a struggle to *secretly* make use of whatever clues the department got from the captives.

Although he’d spent his Saturday jam-packed full of events, once he got to school the following weekday, a different sort of business awaited him. Today at last, Isori came to him for help, and Tatsuya was roped into creating, in the lecture hall, the experimental apparatus that would reproduce the effects of spell-assisting seals using a projector.

“...Then the problem is how much of an error margin the seal will tolerate. Am I understanding correctly?”

“Yeah. How far can the form be distorted and still produce the spell-assisting effects? That’s one of the main themes of our thesis.”

“Would you be able to show me the experimental data you’ve gotten so far?”

“Sure—here it is.”

Watching Tatsuya as he spoke to Isori were Miyuki (looking on in pride) and Honoka (gazing in rapt admiration).

“Honoka, Miyuki, I’m going back on patrol.”

Shizuku’s voice from the side made Honoka snap back to reality. “Oh—okay.

Do your best!”

“Thanks for your work, Shizuku.”

“Yep. I’ll see you two later.”

As Honoka watched her go, Miyuki said, “We should be returning as well.”

After timing their farewell to Tatsuya so as not to get in his way, both of them headed back to the student council room. On the way, Miyuki asked Honoka if anything had changed.

“You haven’t felt like any strange people are following you around or watching you, right?”

“No, I’m fine. Uncle Ushio is worried for me, too. He actually went through the trouble of arranging people from a security company.”

“A magician security company?”

“Yeah... Morisaki’s family’s, actually.”

Miyuki’s look changed slightly upon hearing those words. Nobody could blame her. The security company run by the Morisaki family was rated highly by regular society and magicians alike. She knew that, but it was hard to overcome first impressions.

“Well, er, if Uncle Ushio decided on them, I’m sure it will be okay.”

“...You’re right. Shizuku’s father picked them out, so you shouldn’t have any problems.”

For some reason, it felt a little like a wet blanket had been thrown on them. Eventually, Honoka asked an uneasy question to get rid of that:

“Miyuki... How long should I stay at Shizuku’s house?”

Miyuki blinked, as though she hadn’t expected this question. “Did Shizuku’s family say something to you?”

“No, nothing like that! Uncle Ushio and Aunt Benio and all the people working for her family treat me way better than I have any right to—” Then she looked surprised, realizing she’d unintentionally shouted.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply anything like that.”

“No, um, it was my fault, Miyuki! The way I said it was confusing!” Honoka’s show of determination stopped her classmate from trying to take the blame any further. “Umm, I didn’t mean it like that. I was just wondering how long I’d have to have a bodyguard...”

Honoka’s unease was understandable. Though she was the daughter of a magician family created in a laboratory, she’d never gotten any training that placed her in the middle of combat.

Miyuki didn’t misunderstand that by taking herself as the standard. “At longest, I think it’ll only be until the Thesis Competition is over.”

Honoka probably hadn’t expected a clear answer in return—she stared back at Miyuki in confusion.

“It’s okay. Nothing scary will happen,” answered Miyuki with a gentle smile, the kind a person might give when reassuring a small child.

Honoka went red in the face and looked down.

They hadn’t been aware of this until last Saturday, but Mizuki and Mikihiko’s houses were unexpectedly near each other.

Mizuki’s was one station from the center of Atsugi.

Mikihiko’s was at the foot of the Tanzawa Mountains in Isehara.

They weren’t exactly close geographically speaking, but since a major cabinet line ran from Atsugi to Isehara, it was only five minutes between Mizuki’s closest station and Mikihiko’s.

“Umm, Yoshida, really, this is as far as I need.”

“No, because then what would be the point?”

Because of the Thesis Competition prep, they’d left school right before the gates closed. Since the theme Isori chose for this year needed more computer graphics-type work than device assembly, the art club Mizuki belonged to was in full swing. She personally was best at analog watercolor painting, but she was also quite skilled when it came to CG, it being a necessary illustrating skill these days.

Because of that, she was one of the last to be able to leave. Still, that meant

Mikihiko's title of disciplinary committee chairman could remain intact while he showed her home.

It was already October, almost ten days in. The autumnal equinox had long since come and gone, and the fall sun was quick to set. The impetuous stars had begun to twinkle in the sky. Yes, this was a well-traveled city area, and yes, they would be taking a commuter straight from the station-front to her house, but it wouldn't count as *bringing a girl home* if he said *Okay, see you tomorrow* at the station. Mikihiko was correct on that front.

And Mizuki wasn't unhappy about Mikihiko bringing her to her house, per se. But once the two of them got in the commuter alone, she never knew what to talk about. Neither of them were exactly conversationalists, so they'd discovered on Saturday and Monday that during the cabinet ride, they'd run out of topics.

The two of them alone, in a small car, without anything to say. For Mizuki, who had a very low threshold for embarrassment, this was a major mental burden on her—no, an ordeal.

They were currently at a loose end already while waiting in front of the station for their turn in a commuter, but the silence wasn't an issue because they weren't yet in a closed space.

"By the way, Shibata, you usually do watercolor painting, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yes."

Nevertheless, Mikihiko had thought of something to talk about and couldn't wait until they were in the car. Still, Mizuki would never think *What an inconsiderate boy he is*.

"That's right. I like the gentler coloring of watercolors, so... These days you can get a lot more colors in computer graphics, but I'm one of those people who still wants to physically paint with a brush."

It was Mizuki's personality to try her best to answer anything asked of her.

"And you're still really good at CG—it's amazing."

"Oh, no—I still have a long way to go, even with watercolors."

Mizuki's face was fairly red now as she tried to act modest, pleading wordlessly for him not to praise her any further. Unfortunately, Mikihiko didn't have the experience to glean that from her expression alone.

"But your president said the same thing. That you have a really good sense for diagrams. Come to think of it, you had good grades in magic geometry, didn't you?"

"Um, yes. That's the only reason I get good scores on tests." Mizuki gave a joking smile.

"Ah-ha-ha. I'm the same way. I manage to hang on to a high rank thanks to magic history and linguistics of magic. I'm just awful when it comes to magic engineering."

"Well, you were always better with talismans... Oh—now that I think about it, you didn't choose magic geometry as an elective. Why not?"

"Magic pharmaceuticals was more helpful for my spells, I guess. I do actually plan on studying magic geometry for real at some point, too."

"Oh, so that's why you see Mr. Tsuzura sometimes."

"Well, it's more like he's calling *me*, but..."

These two always thought they had nothing to talk about, but given the chance, their conversations tended to be lively like this.

Still, no matter how much fun he had talking to Mizuki, Mikihiko never stopped being vigilant of their surroundings.

Even now, he could clearly sense the presence of a *shikigami* watching them. While taking care to keep the conversation going, he sent out a searching spell.

The spell didn't reach across space but across meaning. Out of all the gazes focusing on Mizuki, he projected those with magical wave motion into his mind. Not all of the attention on her bore her malice or ill will; in fact, most of them were favorable or amorous. She didn't stand out very much next to Miyuki or Erika, but despite her impression of plainness, she was certainly cuter than your average girl. And because her body had matured now that she was a junior, her physical beauty drew the eye as well.

Most of that noise was reflected because of the “magical wave motion” condition, but a few did pass through the filter and reached Mikihiko’s mind, putting him on edge *in a few different ways*. Even as he worked hard to tackle that, he continued searching for magicians and magical presences targeting Mizuki and him.

Fujibayashi had once called Mikihiko *the child prodigy who’s grown up*. One year of frustration before he’d met Tatsuya. One year of introspection after meeting him and getting mixed up in all sorts of dramatic events. The density of his growth over these two years rivaled ten or twenty years for the average person. The year since meeting Tatsuya especially let him develop as a magician.

As they were talking, their turn came. The commuter in front of them opened its doors automatically, waiting for them to board. Mikihiko let Mizuki get in first, turned to glance around, then used a Return spell, an ancient magic to banish a *shikigami* back to its user.



Everything with a front had to have a back. This time, though, the front and back weren’t just some abstract, metaphorical notion—but a structure’s back door and doorstep.

It may be an odd expression, calling a multiuse building’s entrance a *doorstep*, but in any case, back roads formed in the gaps of back-to-back buildings in shopping districts, opposite the front entrances decorated for visitors, even today. Garbage from each building went through a special underground tube to be automatically collected, and automatic cleaning machines, purchased on a region-by-region basis, traveled the streets, meaning there was no filth to be seen or odor to be smelled. Still, there were naturally places streetlights wouldn’t reach.

“Damn that little brat!”

On one such street, lurking in the dim light, a man who appeared to be around forty held down his hand and swore.

Blood was dripping from between the fingers of his left hand as it covered his right.

“He just Returned my *shiki* demon. I thought the second son of the Yoshida didn’t have his powers anymore!”

He showed no sign of ceasing his audience-free monologue—maybe he had a habit of talking to himself.

“And I can’t believe he’d Return it so violently... I was just *watching* him, that’s all.”

The blood loss seemed to be lasting longer than he thought it would; the man took out not a handkerchief but a scrap of paper—a talisman.

“Offering my own blood? Don’t make me laugh,” he said, placing the talisman on his wound and chanting an incantation. Considering how his final activation verse was *Kyuu-Kyuu-Nyo-Ritsu-Ryou*, he must have been either an onmyouji or a mainland mage.

“You’ll pay for this, you Yoshida brat. And my blood doesn’t come cheap.”

“Come on, it’s over. With your skills, old man, he’ll just turn the tables on you *again*.”

Aghast, the man turned toward the voice. He was no amateur. He always put up a bounded field that would block perception when he got to work on any of his “jobs.” He hadn’t forgotten the circle, either, that would warn him if anyone did approach. And yet he’d been taken entirely by surprise.

Without a word, the man removed a new talisman. No amateur would ever randomly stumble into his bounded field. Considering what the person had just said, they were doubtlessly an enemy.

But the man would never fire his spell.

“Hey, your back is wide open.”

Another young man had crept up behind the man, who had already turned around, and reaped his consciousness. Delivering an impact hard enough to knock someone out actually came with an unignorable possibility of lasting effects. But they didn’t seem to hesitate in the slightest.

“This pitiful excuse for a magician doesn’t even make for good training. Are you sure they needed bodyguards?”

“Don’t be like that. Enduring idleness is just another part of our training.”

The two young men who exchanged looks had very similar builds and features. The resemblance wasn’t natural, though—it was the similarity of those who had eaten from the same pot, who had overcome the same hellish experiences.

And above all, both their heads were equally shorn, down to a smooth shine.



During the downtime between first and second period the next day, Tatsuya visited the disciplinary committee HQ on a call from Mikihiko.

“Oh—Tatsuya. Sorry for calling you here.”

Having arrived first, Mikihiko watched for the moment Tatsuya entered the room and did something on the console at his hands.

The door locked, and on the front, it showed an “In Meeting” display.

“Don’t worry about it. What did you need all of a sudden?”

“We don’t have time, so I’ll be short. On our way home yesterday, Shibata was targeted,” he told Tatsuya, his eyes harsh.

Tatsuya *pretended* to be surprised. “Mizuki? She wasn’t acting like it at all.”

“She didn’t notice. We were just being watched from a distance by *shikigami*, and I broke all their spells.”

“I see,” said Tatsuya, making sure to *sound* relieved.

Mikihiko gazed at him, and then criticism came to his eyes. “Just like you predicted, Tatsuya.”

“Yeah. Thanks for sticking with her.”

“It’s just so strange.”

Tatsuya feigned incomprehension at what Mikihiko was saying and listened to the incriminating words that came next.

“Why do people like *that* need to be going after Shibata? They weren’t just some thugs. I couldn’t call them first-rate, but it seemed like they were used to criminal acts.”

“You mean they were professional criminals?”

“They certainly weren’t *reputable* magicians.” For a moment, Mikihiko had trouble speaking, but he didn’t stay silent. “Why would they be after Shibata? If their goal is the Thesis Competition, they would go after Isori, or Nakajou, or Minakami. Tatsuya, you’re hiding something from us, aren’t you?! That modified *shikigami* activation sequence you showed me before—you didn’t just randomly run across it. It has to do with you guys being attacked and Mizuki being targeted, doesn’t it?!”

No answer came from Tatsuya.

Mikihiko was the first one to look away. “Tatsuya... You always turn it down, saying you don’t need it, but I feel indebted toward you. You’re the one I have to thank for regaining my confidence and strength as a magician.”

Tatsuya tried to argue, but Mikihiko cut him off and continued.

“I wouldn’t do anything to disadvantage you. If you told me to help, I’d do anything I could. And if you wanted to keep something a secret, I’d never tell a soul.”

Mikihiko once again gave him a desperate look. The light in his eyes made it seem like he was somehow backed into a corner. “But if I don’t know what’s going on, I don’t have any way to protect Shibata!”

That was almost like confessing to Tatsuya that he had special feelings for Mizuki, but Tatsuya didn’t try to use that to divert the conversation—though Mikihiko was too worked up to notice.

“I can’t give you any details.”

“Tatsuya!” Naturally, Mikihiko pressed him.

“A foreign magician who guided enemy saboteurs here during the Yokohama Incident last year is being protected by the Traditionalists. I’m chasing him down.”

But at the fragment of truth that came from Tatsuya next, Mikihiko lost both his words and the color in his face.

“Sorry. That’s as much as I can tell you.”

“Oh, right... You’re in the—”

Right before saying *army*, Mikihiko abruptly clammed up. It wasn’t something he could ever say aloud, even inside a soundproofed field.

“No, I’m sorry,” he said. “And thanks for talking to me.”

He was under the completely wrong impression. Just as Tatsuya had led him.

And Tatsuya didn’t feel any guilt about that, either. It was *still* too early for the truth behind this incident, and his connection to the Yotsuba, to be known. Right now, it was still too dangerous for anyone to know. It was *still too early to pull in Mikihiko as a collaborator*.

“Tatsuya, you said the Traditionalists, right?”

“Yeah. I at least know that they’re protecting the target.”

“...Then I think I can help you. After school—no, that won’t work. Can we talk tonight? I’ll bring Shibata home, then come back to school.”

“All right.”

Maya hadn’t exactly given him a deadline, and from Tatsuya’s point of view, the whole thing wasn’t that much of a rush. He didn’t have a personal agenda against Gongjin Zhou, either. Frankly speaking, leaving it all alone wouldn’t have pained him in the slightest.

But he decided if that was what it took to placate Mikihiko, then he was fine with that.

Seven PM. As one would expect, even the Thesis Competition work was winding down at this point. Despite only male students sticking around, staying any later than this would be considered a problem for peacekeeping and discipline.

That usually left Isori, the competition team leader, in charge of anything after the gates closed, as he was previously a student council member. Normally, however, either the student council president or their representative was supposed to oversee things. When Tatsuya remained in the school, nobody gave him so much as a second look.

Since he’d had no free time of late, homework had been piling up pretty high

—a report for a general-ed class, for example. After calling up his curriculum on a student council room terminal, he shot through all the accumulated things he had to submit.

Right after he finished his physics report, a chime went off, signaling a visitor to the student council room.

“Pixie, could you?”

“Yes, Master.”

Tatsuya ordered Pixie to respond to it—the *girl* had become the student council room’s exclusive maid. She’d received orders in advance to let Mikihiko through if he came.

“Sorry for the wait, Tatsuya.”

After sitting in a seat recommended to him by Pixie, Mikihiko started off with an acceptable greeting.

“Don’t be. I just got to a good break point,” answered Tatsuya.

Mikihiko gave him a doubtful look. Tatsuya hadn’t done anything with his terminal after he came in. The list of reports on its monitor was visible from where Mikihiko sat.

But if he made any unnecessary comments now, his sense of tension would break.

“This might sound sudden, but let’s pick up from this morning.”

He abruptly got to the point, not necessarily because he wanted to preserve the mood but because he didn’t want to let his own thoughts dull.

“I want to confirm one thing. Tatsuya, you’re certain your target is being protected by the Traditionalists, right?”

“The info comes from a trustworthy source.”

“I see...” Mikihiko thought about this but only for a few short moments. “First, I want to make my position clear. Those calling themselves the Traditionalists are, for better or worse, a very large faction of ancient magicians. You could break ancient magicians up into the Traditionalists, the factions supporting

them, and the factions opposing them.”

“Really? My master said magicians inheriting real traditions hated them.”

He hadn’t actually gotten that fact from Yakumo, but he’d decided it was better to leave it at that and not invite unneeded suspicion.

“They do. But on the flip side, a lot of civilian magicians who feel like rankings and precepts are constraining have sympathy for the Traditionalists, who band together regardless of their schools.”

“Which group does your family belong to?”

Before, Mikihiko had said he would make his position clear. That must have meant he’d clearly tell Tatsuya whether he, or perhaps the Yoshida, were cooperative with or hostile toward the Traditionalists.

“The Yoshida family broke free of a certain religious discipline a long time ago. And we worship the *kami*, too, in order to discover a magic that will lead to godhood.”

That was a trait of magicians cooperative with the Traditionalists.

“And that’s why the Yoshida family stands against the Traditionalists.”

Mikihiko’s answer, however, was a curveball.

“The Traditionalists who were part of old Lab Nine think about magic in a fundamentally different way than the Yoshida. What we aim for is only magic to achieve divinity. Their doctrine that everything is acceptable as long as they can increase their power—we would never be able to align with them.”

Tatsuya couldn’t tell from the information he’d heard now whether that remark was Mikihiko’s personal feelings or values instilled in him by his parents. But even if it was borrowed, he certainly seemed to have a lot of respect for his own thoughts on it.

“Which is why this time, all that other stuff aside, you can rely on me. And if you wanted, I think I could give you my full assistance as a member of the Yoshida, too.”

“Wait, that’s... If I ask the Yoshida for help, I’d need to tell them everything.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

When it came to what Tatsuya couldn’t talk about, he and Mikihiko had two different things in mind, but Tatsuya was the only one who knew that.

“All right. Then we’ll try my second plan. I thought up a way where you don’t have to provide too many details,” said Mikihiko, giving a mean-spirited grin, one that didn’t exactly suit him. “I don’t know whether I should call it unfortunate or fortunate, but the Traditionalists’ main base is in Kyoto, where the Thesis Competition is being held this year.”

The information Mikihiko was so proud to give was at odds with what he’d heard from Fujibayashi and Minoru in Nara, but he didn’t have any way to discern which was correct.

“That’s what it seems like.”

Instead, he decided to hear Mikihiko out under the assumption *both* were true.

“We’d planned to dispatch a security team to begin with, to inspect the situation there, but I’m thinking I’ll go with them.”

“And?”

“Tatsuya, this is why you decided to be part of the security team, isn’t it?”

Mikihiko answered Tatsuya’s question with one of his own.

Instead of pressing for an answer, Tatsuya answered Mikihiko’s. “That’s right.”

“Then you can move about the city however you wish. Because you can say you’re taking a *very* broad look around the venue so that nothing like last year happens again.”

“Well, I appreciate it. Anyway, what about you?”

“I’ll be the decoy. I think I’ll use flashy search *shiki* from the new International Conference Hall and rub all the Traditionalists the wrong way with it.”

“I get it.” Finally understanding, Tatsuya grinned.

“If the Traditionalists lash out, we’ll have a justification for self-defense. And

then it won't be your job—it'll be the Yoshida family's fight."

"What about the power discrepancy?"

"None of us would ever lose on one-on-one skill. And if the Traditionalists put in enough people to overwhelm the Yoshida, the other schools wouldn't remain silent. What's important is having them make the first move. The ancient schools are all very keen on pretexts. If we make the first move, they'll stick to observing, but if *they* do, they're sure to come in to arbitrate."

Tatsuya ran a quick mental simulation of what would happen in that case. His fear was ancient magicians getting into flash magic shoot-outs, turning city streets into battlefields. If the police and JDF had their hands full putting it down, Gongjin Zhou would escape in the chaos.

But if the Traditionalists struck first and the ancient schools came in to arbitrate, he'd have an excuse to investigate the Traditionalists' interior. Tatsuya could see that going *very* well for him.

"What if they don't make a move?"

"Then my *shiki* will find your target, Tatsuya. He's a Taoist from China, right? The wave motion of his psions would be different. After you put me through all that work, telling apart psionic waves is basically my special skill now. I'm confident no ancient magicians could hold a candle to me."

"That's some big talk."

Tatsuya grinned but didn't deny his boasting. Ancient magicians would tell magic apart. They didn't customarily view psionic waves themselves like modern magicians did. This was because it was meaningless to observe psionic waves that weren't spells. Psionic wave observation was a modern magic technique created during the process of researching technical usage methods of psions. And almost no modern magicians had the skill to gain practical observation data to reproduce the level of precision that, for example, the Stars had used when detecting the parasites *on one's own*.

Mikihiko's brag had enough evidence behind it.

"What about Mizuki?"

Mikihiko's face, brimming with confidence, suddenly darkened. Tatsuya was amused by the ease of that change, but he knew, at least, that this wasn't the right place to laugh.

"...It's too dangerous to bring Shibata with us."

"In that case, I'll arrange for a bodyguard."

"Would you do that?"

"Of course. I'm the one who got you guys caught up in this to begin with."

Mikihiko breathed a sigh of relief—probably because he thought Tatsuya would arrange for a bodyguard from the JDF.

In reality, pupils of Yakumo's were already protecting Mizuki, but just in case, he planned to dispatch a different group of magicians from what Mikihiko thought.

"When will you say something?"

"As disciplinary committee chairman, I'd have to lay the groundwork with the school... Probably Friday."

"All right. I'll tell Miyuki, too, so the student council can make things work."

"...Wait, aren't you part of the student council? You should do it yourself."

Tatsuya didn't answer that; he just grinned mischievously.

Mikihiko gave a pained smile and rose from his seat.



Thursday night, October 11, 2096, at a certain point in Kyoto.

The skies were jet-black, the thick cloud cover ready to rain at any moment.

Even the park, a place of recreation for the people during the day, nearly emptied in the middle of the night. And tonight, specifically, it was host to only two silhouettes. One stood by the river, and the other walked downstream to get to him.

"Lord Nakura, have I made you wait?" Gongjin Zhou asked as he approached.

"No, you're right on time, Mr. Zhou," Nakura replied, looking up to give a

suitably friendly greeting.

They stood at a distance just wide enough that if they both reached out a hand, they wouldn't connect.

"It's been two months," Zhou commented.

"Yes, and it seems like ages," Nakura countered Zhou's opening jab with a straight punch. "I would have liked to visit you, but I didn't know where you currently take up residence. Please excuse this rudeness on my part."

"I was surprised at the suddenness of the incident that *forced* you to *relocate*. Had I known before, I would have passed it on for you."

"No, I don't intend to ask you to go to such lengths. The enemy being who they are, it was inevitable, even if they didn't know in advance what I was attempting to do."

Nakura pointed out that Zhou had run from the Kuroba with his tail between his legs, and Zhou remarked cynically that the Yotsuba's inside information was too much for the Saegusa family to handle. The comments were mean-spirited; they traded looks, Nakura's steady and Zhou's a graceful smile—though this sort of exchange was par for the course.

"Now then, Lord Nakura, what business might you have with me today?" asked Zhou without dropping his smile—as though he didn't know how to make any other expression. He wasn't impatient, though; the situation just didn't call for a protracted conversation.

"Mr. Zhou, were you aware the Kudou have joined forces with the Yotsuba?"

Zhou's eyebrow twitched. It didn't lead to his smile vanishing just yet, though. "I was not... All for me?"

"We believe the Yotsuba family discovered that the Traditionalists were protecting you and requested the Kudou's cooperation, as they're hostile toward the Traditionalists."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha..." Suddenly, Zhou started to laugh loudly. "It seems I've certainly moved up in the world. I'm being targeted not only by the Yotsuba, led by the current world's strongest, but also the Kudou, once the world's *trickiest*."

Zhou laughed in amusement. It was neither desperation nor the madness of a cornered beast. From the beginning, he had been quietly insane—that was the sort of impression his laughing gave.

“The Kudou have long since been at odds with them—I’m sure they’ve fully investigated the Traditionalists. We doubt it will be long before they discover your hiding place, Mr. Zhou,” remarked Nakura uninterestedly, unmoved by the metamorphosis.

Zhou calmed himself and responded sarcastically, “I see, yes indeed. I’ve stayed with everyone in the Traditionalists for close to two months now, but perhaps it’s time to make myself scarce. Now then, are you—or rather, the Saegusa family—offering to provide me a new hiding place?”

“Yes.” Nakura nodded.

Zhou looked at him dubiously—that must not have been the answer he was expecting.

“I will speak directly. The Saegusa cannot tolerate you falling into the Yotsuba’s hands, Mr. Zhou. We must not let them know of the connection between you and us.”

“And you will give me a place to which to abscond?”

“Yes,” confirmed Nakura to Zhou’s question, which expressed it not as a *hiding place*, but somewhere to *run away* to. “I will bring you somewhere the Yotsuba’s hands will never reach.”

“Ah... As for the name of this place—”

With a casual motion, Zhou reached into his pocket.

In the blink of an eye, a portable terminal-type CAD was gripped in Nakura’s hand.

“—I do hope it isn’t Hades!”

“No, it is a place called burn in hell!”

Both of them leaped backward at the same time. Zhou produced a paper strip—a *lingpai*, or command token—with a black luster from his pocket, and Nakura expanded an activation sequence from his CAD.

Zhou probably had the spell waiting from the start, because their spells triggered at the same time.

From Zhou's token sprang a quadrupedal beast, completely black—probably a compound form made to look like a dog. The black dog leaped off the ground, then shot in a line toward Nakura's windpipe.

Dozens of clear needles pierced its shadowy body from below.

Nakura's feet were over the shoreline. The needles that had penetrated the Shadow Beast had been fired from the river.

"Water needles..." In the darkness, Zhou's eyes saw the clear needles for what they really were. "How careless of me. It was a mistake to designate a riverside meeting place. It seems you have the *terrain* advantage."

"And you're using a spell to create animal compound forms using shadows as a medium."

"Yes. I'm ashamed to tell you its name, as it is quite artless, but my master called it Shadow Beast. He was quite proud, despite its age, of it being a hybrid spell—western sorcery integrated with immortalism."

"Western sorcery... The hellhound, then. I must have mistaken the *time*. I should have at least made sure the moon would be out."

They weren't leisurely exchanging lectures about their spells. Even as they spoke, the token Zhou held was spewing forth Shadow Beasts, and Nakura was intercepting them with water needles.

Zhou didn't seem to be putting together a new spell. That meant the *lingpai* in his hand had probably been loaded with a great many Shadow Beasts. It had already produced over ten, yet it showed no signs of running out. Casting so many layers of magic on a single small token spoke to his bottomless reserve of strength.

"Still, I find I don't understand."

"Understand what?"

But Zhou was the first one to ask a question.

Nakura's expression didn't change as he mechanically shot down all the

illusory beasts Zhou was creating. Even his voice as he replied was practically devoid of emotion.

“Lab Seven’s research theme was colony-control magic. Magic that can simultaneously manipulate over a hundred objects at the very least. Far more than the number you’re controlling now. Could it be you’re holding back on me?”

“Funny. Against you, I wouldn’t be able to hold back,” answered Nakura in a voice that sounded surprised. The fact that his voice held more emotion than his remark drew Zhou’s attention. “Mr. Zhou, do you know the term Extra Numbers?”

More needles flew at Zhou. In the dark, they were almost imperceptible to the human eye, but Zhou sidestepped to easily avoid them.

His speed was likely more than could be achieved with muscle power alone. Did Chinese ancient magic have spells with the same effects as self-acceleration spells?

“I do know it. I hear it refers to magician families who were granted numbers in the magician development institutes but later had them stripped away.”

Needles flew one after another. Zhou was busy dodging them, unable to time his Shadow Beast production. The attacker had become the defender.

“Then do you know the reason those numbers were stripped away?”

“I’m afraid not. Actually, I do know it happened if those people didn’t exhibit the desired abilities.”

The needles turned into a pelting downpour. Zhou pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket.

The white handkerchief grew in size until it covered his whole body, protecting him from the shower of needles.

Nakura stopped his attacks.

Zhou let the cloth down, showing his face.

“I am one of those magicians who didn’t have those desired abilities at Lab Seven.”

“Oh—excuse my rudeness, then.”

Zhou unleashed a Shadow Beast.

Nakura used his CAD to barely shoot it down in time.

Zhou lowered the hand holding the *lingpai*.

Nakura, fingers still on his CAD, resumed his account of his experiences regarding the Extra Numbers.

“The basic form of colony-control magic is to prepare what you’ll use as bullets in advance, then control them.”

Nakura expanded an activation sequence.

Zhou readied his white cloth.

“But that didn’t seem useful in real combat to me. Battles do not only occur when you happen to be carrying cumbersome mediums. When one has an assistance tool called a CAD that was specifically developed to be something you could have on you at all times, must we carry unnecessary baggage?”

“As a follower of the ancient immortalist arts who cannot use magic without convenient spell tools to act as mediums, your commentary stings. Still, I don’t believe all CADs are things you can wear on you at all times, either. Some are modeled after large handguns, for example.”

“Ah, handgun-shaped specialized CADs. I don’t believe those are practical for combat, either.”

Nakura and Zhou, both maintaining a magic-ready state, eyed each other for an opening. Or maybe this conversation exchanged between them was itself a gamble to create that opening.

“In any case, I couldn’t appreciate the institute’s direction. That was why I arranged their colony-control magic to be usable at any time. It meant I couldn’t target more than a hundred things to control at once, but in exchange, I formulated techniques for giving form to liquid and using it as bullets.”

“How unfortunate.”

“As a result, I was stripped of my number.”

At this time, the order of their speaking had reversed. The one who planned this was Gongjin Zhou. And by that, Nakura was robbed of a shard of his awareness.

Zhou hurled his *lingpai* forward.

Taken by surprise, Nakura launched his needles at Zhou—not in a barrage, but in an arcing path.

A Shadow Beast burst out of the token in midair.

Nakura built up a new spell to intercept it.

The white cloth flapped and fell. Behind it, Gongjin Zhou was gone.

The Shadow Beast, hit by the water needles, turned into a shadow and melted into the night. The crowd of arcing water needles laced the empty air.

After falling onto the water's surface, the *lingpai* spewed out a black shadow.

Nakura, catching that out of the corner of his eye, cast a jumping spell. By the skin of his teeth, he escaped the jaws launching out of the water spray.

Landing on the *opposite shore*, Nakura gathered himself, preparing for the next attack. But as he stared across the river into the darkness, a black horn pierced through his gut from behind.

The horn that stabbed through Nakura's gut melted into a tar-like goop, then blew away on the night winds flowing across the water's surface. Support lost, he fell, faceup.

He heard footsteps tramping through the river gravel in front of his head. Struggling, he looked, and the first thing he saw was the white cloth that had hidden his foe. From beyond it, the man was now walking toward him. He wasn't unharmed, either; there were holes in the left shoulder and right side of his expensive-looking three-piece suit, stained with blood.

"It seems...it was not...an illusion...that fooled me."

Nakura realized what had happened without it being explained. He thought he'd jumped to the *opposite bank* in his effort to get away from Zhou, but he'd actually jumped toward *this bank* and landed, turning his back to the enemy.

“Yes. It was always I who was fighting you.”

“Deceiving...directions... Is this...the immortalist art...of Qimen...Dunjia...?”

Nakura’s voice stopped and started and was hard to make out, but Zhou understood it without issue. “Yes. And I must say, it’s been a long time since I shed this much blood. In my experience, Saburou Nakura, you are more skilled than Mitsugu Kuroba.”

“Ha...ha-ha... Such...an honor...”

Zhou knelt down next to Nakura and spoke to him gently. “We once had drinks together. Do you have any last requests?”

“Requests...well... Perhaps one thing...”

“What is it?”

“Please...”

“Yes?”

“Die with me!”

Nakura’s shout was a rallying cry of his final strength.

Perhaps it was an incantation—literal curse words.

Nakura’s body exploded from the chest, his blood turning into needles.

Zhou covered his face reflexively; in a moment, he pulled his arms away and scowled at the red needles that covered them. “It was a final request. I would have been happy to oblige you.”

He groped around for the needle that had slipped through his arms and stabbed his ear, then pulled it out.

The needle melted back into blood, leaving a small scar on his earlobe. Sighing, he took out another *lingpai* from his jacket pocket.

The blood needles hit their event alteration time limit and all melted at once, at which point Zhou chanted a short spell.

The stabbing wounds on his skin began to disappear, like a clip of time-lapse photography (or high-speed playback).

“Unfortunately, it would take more than this level of magic to kill me.”

Zhou stood up, looked at his clothes, and sighed. He’d predicted Nakura would come at him with something—likely something close to a suicide attack. He had only able to cover his face with his arms because he was on his guard from the previous needle attacks.

“This won’t be much use anymore. It may be nighttime, but I would only draw attention looking like this.”

But he hadn’t fully predicted the attack would use Nakura’s own blood. Looking down at his clothes stained in a dead man’s blood, he sighed again.

Zhou took out the handkerchief in his pocket, which he’d returned to its place at some point.

No, not returned it—it was clearly a different one than the first.

The handkerchief wasn’t white but black.

He opened the dark-colored handkerchief, and a shadow spread wide to cover his body.

The black cloth, which had changed into a handkerchief, merged with the shadow, and then only Nakura’s corpse was left.



Friday, October 12: With only half a month left until the Thesis Competition on October 28, the hustle and bustle in school abruptly intensified. It was anticipated they'd have less work than the major operation last year, since Kyoto's competition was mainly theoretical, but all hell was still breaking loose.

Isori was heading up the preparations for the presentation itself, which had reached the final stages. The security team had Hattori at the helm, and he was working hard at his training. Meanwhile, Honoka and Izumi were putting their heads together to make arrangements for transportation to Kyoto.

Of course, Tatsuya and Miyuki weren't goofing off, either. As student council president, Miyuki was keeping a watchful eye over everyone's progress, sending helpers to places falling behind schedule. In most cases, that helper ended up being Tatsuya. He'd already helped work on the presentation, taken part in the security team's training, cleaned up some student council work that Miyuki, Honoka, and Izumi couldn't get to, and on top of all that, he was flitting about to assist Miyuki with odds and ends.

Once Mikihiko arrived in the student council room, it was right before the gates closed after school, and Tatsuya had just managed to wring out a few spare moments between the pressing work.

"Hey, I'm here..."

Mikihiko seemed like he still wasn't used to taking the direct stairs connecting the student council room and the disciplinary committee HQ. It was in stark contrast to Shizuku, who casually came and went between both rooms (and who was currently serving as a bodyguard for Azusa).

"You're right on time."

Even Tatsuya's lighthearted greeting failed to take away Mikihiko's tension. "Well... After seeing how busy you've been, I can't exactly turn up late, can I?"

Upon hearing that, Miyuki offered a weak smile, with just a little resignation creeping into it. "It would be nice if everyone else shared your punctuality, Yoshida."

Sensing *that* was a calm before the storm, Tatsuya urged Mikihiko to get down to business. "Mikihiko, why don't we start right away?"

"Right, sure thing."

Perhaps getting the same impression, Mikihiko unfurled the large-sized electronic paper he'd been holding rolled up onto the conference desk. It almost covered the entire desk, and on it emerged a map of the city of Kyoto.

"The reason I asked for a meeting today is to discuss our preliminary examinations regarding on-site security," he began to explain, his tone businesslike. "Former club committee chairman Hattori is handling the preparations for security on the day of. He's also handling the meetings with other schools on his own, and we can keep relying on him for these things."

"Is it okay to not invite Hattori here?" Honoka asked.

It wasn't Mikihiko but Tatsuya who nodded. "We have an understanding that we'll just report the results of this meeting to him. Right, Chairman Yoshida?"

"Executive Secretary Shiba is correct."

Mikihiko seemed to have trouble saying the title *executive secretary*. But he didn't have the guts to ignore his job title in front of Miyuki.

"Former Chairman Hattori told me he didn't need to be part of today's meeting. All we're trying to do is gather information. I guess he's all right if we just give him the results."

Finally, unable to ignore the strange feeling of speaking formally any further, by his last sentence, his tone had changed into a familiar one.

"Why don't we get straight to it, then?" asked Tatsuya, immediately going along with it, maybe finding it easier to speak this way as well.

"Sure thing. Please look at this," Mikihiko said. Despite his friendly tone, he

still remembered his *please* and *thank-yous* to Miyuki. “This is the venue, the New International Conference Hall.”

“It’s quite far from the city center,” offered Izumi when she saw the map.

“Apparently, the locals were insistent they not have big conferences in the middle of the city,” Mikihiko answered with a wry grin, before drawing back his expression. “Unlike last year, there won’t be much traffic nearby. It would seem that criminals and saboteurs have few angles of entry, but if there’s a lot of nature around, that would give them plenty of places where they could hide and prepare their schemes.”

He reverted the map, which he’d magnified on the venue’s surroundings before, to the map of all of Kyoto.

“And if there isn’t anywhere to hide nearby, I think it’s possible they’ll set up their base of operations a short distance away.”

Then, *as they’d decided in advance*, Miyuki interjected, “Then you believe we should investigate a broader area than just the vicinity of the conference hall?”

“Yes. I’d rather not have a repeat of last year.”

Then Tatsuya immediately launched a second volley of support fire. “Agreed. We may only be high school students, but we still need to do what we can.”

Gazes brimming with surprise gathered on Tatsuya. Honoka and Izumi aside, he would rather have Minami—who already knew the circumstances—not look at him like that, but it was important for Honoka and Izumi, who would presumably be staying behind this time, not to harbor any suspicions toward her. He pretended not to be aware of the three sets of eyes.

“Anyway, Mikihiko, who will be in the group going to look at things in advance?”

“I’ll go,” replied Mikihiko.

“Will the school be all right without its disciplinary committee chairman?”

“I’m thinking of having Kitayama, currently acting as a bodyguard, look after the school. And I’d like you to come, too, Tatsuya.”

“I don’t mind. We probably need at least one of the security members

checking the site out.”

“Brother, if it is all right with you, I’d like to accompany you.”

“You—the student council president?” Tatsuya asked opaquely.

Miyuki was actually better at those sorts of acts in times like these. “I’d like to meet with the manager of the hotel where everyone coming to cheer us on will be staying. I also want to find a shelter we can evacuate to should worse come to worst.”

“Miyuki, in that case, I can—”

“Honoka, you still have work I gave you personally, like transportation and budgeting, right? I’m only overseeing everything, so I haven’t taken on any particular work.”

“I...guess...” Honoka withdrew, looking disappointed.

After hearing Miyuki and Honoka’s exchange, Izumi looked like she wanted to say something, but before she could manage to, Miyuki preempted her. “Izumi, since you’re the vice president, I’d like to leave you here in my place while I’m away in Kyoto. Will you do that for me?”

“Of course. I’ll do my very best.”

Needless to say, Izumi honestly wanted to go with Miyuki to Kyoto, too. But she wasn’t one who could say no when her beloved Miyuki asked her to be her replacement. In fact, she was the type of girl who would get excited over Miyuki asking her to do something for her.

“What will the schedule look like?” asked Tatsuya.

“It’ll be a little tight, but how about a Saturday before the competition, staying over from the twentieth to the twenty-first?” responded Mikihiko.

“Seems like a good idea. Do you already have lodging in mind?”

“No, I figured we’d leave that until we decided.”

“I see. Minami?” Then Tatsuya addressed Minami as the final piece of their preparation.

“Yes?”

He'd explained this scenario to her, so she wasn't especially surprised—she looked as calm, despite her age, as she always did.

“Sorry to ask this, but could you make a hotel reservation? Preferably the one we'll stay in the day before the competition. It will be me, Miyuki, Mikihiko, and you, so four of us.”

“I'm going, too?”

“Yeah. I want you to help out Miyuki while we're there.”

Izumi made a frustrated expression at that remark. She was probably thinking how much *she* wanted to be the one to support Miyuki. But she'd already accepted the job of being her replacement. If Tatsuya had asked her to do that, she would have easily retracted her previous statement. But she couldn't even consider for a moment refusing something Miyuki asked her to do.

Once closing time came around, Tatsuya left the student council room with Honoka ahead of everyone else. Their destination was where Shizuku was standing guard for Azusa, who was leading the team making the experimental devices.

On the way, they met up with Mikihiko, who had just finished locking up the disciplinary committee HQ, and the three of them headed for the lab building. Unlike Isori, who was heading up work in the lecture hall, Azusa was using a fixture-type CAD, which was more for use in experiments.

“Shizuku!” Honoka called.

Shizuku turned to look at them, along with Tomoko Chikura, also a bodyguard for Azusa; Sayaka; and Kiri-hara, supposedly Minakami's bodyguard, who was here for some reason.

“What's wrong, Shiba? We put in a request to stay late. I think.”

Even Kiri-hara had finally stopped calling him *my man Shiba*. He called him *Shiba* now and called Miyuki *President*. One could call those the most appropriate forms of address, even.

“Yes, we received your application, but it's still not good to keep female students at school so late.”

“...But, I mean...” said Kirihara to Sayaka, tilting his head. It seemed Sayaka was the *selfish* one here.

“Anyway, what is it?” asked Shizuku to Honoka just as things were getting awkward. She’d tried to read the mood and change the topic, but she was the only one Tatsuya and Mikihiko were here for.

“Kitayama, there’s something I’d like to ask you to do.”

“Me?” Shizuku perked her head to the side in a doll-like motion.

After a short chuckle, Mikihiko got to the point: “We actually decided to go to Kyoto to scout things out before the competition.”

“In case something like last year happens?” The words *scout things out* were enough for Shizuku to understand the *official* reasoning.

“Yeah. We plan to stay over from the twentieth to the twenty-first to check on some things. Would you mind doing the chairperson’s job for those two days?”

Shizuku, for some reason, looked over at Honoka rather than the bowing Mikihiko. “What about you, Honoka?”

“Huh? I’m...staying here.”

“Hmm...” Shizuku’s focus shifted to Tatsuya. “Are you going, Tatsuya?”

“Yeah.”

After thinking for a moment, she gave an agreement to Mikihiko.

“Thanks,” he stated in return. “That’s a big help.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, once again not looking at Mikihiko as he lowered his head, but at Honoka, who was averting her eyes from Tatsuya.



In the cabinet on the way home, Tatsuya was reading the news. He suddenly looked slightly surprised.

“Brother, is something the matter?” his sister asked instantly from next to him.

“Yeah—it’s this news article.”

He turned his information terminal toward her. A local article from the Kyoto area was displayed on it. He seemed to have started his information gathering and found a detailed account of a murdered corpse discovered in a famous sightseeing spot.

“The body was discovered this morning, and the victim’s name was Saburou Nakura... Ah! Isn’t that...?!” Right away, she’d figured out the reason behind his reaction.

“Is it someone you know?” asked Minami—reasonable, considering she’d never heard the name before.

“Unless he has the same name,” Tatsuya began carefully, “this is the magician serving as Saegusa’s bodyguard.”

Minami’s eyes widened. “Is it truly him?”

“Hard to say—there’s no photograph,” he explained—though he had a gut feeling this victim was indeed the older man guarding Mayumi.

“If it was...is there any chance it could be a coincidence?” Miyuki asked. Tatsuya and Minami both had the same question.

A Saegusa family magician had been killed in Kyoto, where chances were high that Gongjin Zhou was hiding. And in what the press was calling an unnatural death.

The article said the corpse was in a *normally unthinkable state*. Probably the result of defeat in magical combat.

To kill a magician with such skills as to be entrusted with the Saegusa’s eldest daughter’s safety, and one who was highly likely to have been an Extra—only so many people had that kind of skill. The man who had dealt a major wound to Mitsugu Kuroba, then broken out of a Kuroba squad’s encirclement and escaped, for example...

This certainly didn’t seem like a coincidence to Tatsuya.



She was, without a doubt, the most surprised upon seeing the news that Nakura had been killed.

“Father, please explain this!”

As soon as she was informed of Kouichi’s return, she’d barged into her father’s study.

“What’s going on? Why was Nakura killed?!”

She slammed her hands down on the thick desk and pressed her father, sitting behind it, for answers.

“How do you know that Nakura was killed?”

“Because the police station called me to confirm his identity!”

“And you accepted? What about university?”

“They couldn’t get in touch with you or my brothers, so they came to me!”

“What the hell are they doing...?” murmured Kouichi about his sons.

Upon hearing that, Mayumi’s emotions started boiling even more. “Does any of that really matter right now?!” She honestly couldn’t care less about her father or oldest brother disappearing, or her second-oldest brother pretending to be out—that was par for the course. “Stop trying to change the subject, please! What do they *mean* Nakura was killed?!”

“They mean just that. Nakura has been killed. We’ve lost a valuable man.”

“That isn’t what I’m asking you right now! Why was Nakura killed *in Kyoto*?!”

“That isn’t for you to know,” he snapped to brush her off.

But Mayumi wasn’t a weakhearted, pampered girl—that wasn’t enough to scare her. “Nakura is *my* bodyguard. I have a right to know the truth.”

Her tone had calmed, but her emotions were raging all the more intensely within. Anyone could tell that, not only Kouichi. He knew his daughter’s personality and sensed he’d need to compromise to a degree.

“I had dispatched Nakura to Kyoto for a certain job. He must have run into some trouble there.”

“A job? What sort of job?”

“A job of the utmost importance for the Saegusa family—one of the Ten

Master Clans.”

“You didn’t answer me! What was it *about*?!”

“Something you don’t need to know.”

But he wouldn’t admit to there being a need to compromise any further than that.

That got through to Mayumi, too. She realized pressing him any more wouldn’t get her anywhere.

“...Fine. If you’ll excuse me.”

Harboring deep suspicions about her father, Mayumi left the study.

But Mayumi hadn’t given up on getting to the bottom of all this.

She and Nakura hadn’t actually been that close. He’d always been polite and civil with her, only ever attending to her as a servant. She’d always sensed something *other*, something eerie about him.

Nevertheless, she had known him and been with him for a period of time that was by no means short. And now, because of a job her own father had ordered him to do...

Mayumi didn’t believe it one bit when Kouichi said that he’d run into trouble. She was confident he hadn’t been wrapped up in something—he’d been killed *during* and *because of* his work.

Still, that was nothing more than her intuition speaking. She didn’t have any proof at the moment, and she understood that.

“What’s wrong, Mayumi? You keep sighing. And you don’t seem like yourself. Are you sick or something?”

“Huh? No, it’s nothing, Mari.”

“Certainly doesn’t look like nothing... If it isn’t, then you need to pull yourself together. Everyone’s been staring for a while.”

“Wait, really?!”

Mayumi hastily straightened and reseated herself, fixing her wide-open collar and deeply slit hem.

They were in the Magic University cafeteria, and it was lunchtime, the period between morning and afternoon lectures. A lot of the students got together at this time after eating, and when the noble daughter of the Saegusa of the Ten Master Clans was looking languid and slightly indecent, obviously they'd be looking at her.

Incidentally, Mari wasn't here because she was skipping out on drills at the Defense Academy. The Magic University had a system of accepting an occasional student from the Defense Academy's special combat graduate course—broadly speaking, lessons to foster magician commanders—and a student chosen by the academy would visit once per week to attend lectures. Mari had been chosen as that occasional student, and today was the day of those lectures.

At first, Mayumi pretended nothing was going on, but that didn't last long. She was probably relieved, too, at a friend she hadn't seen in a long time being in front of her. Realizing she was about to heave another sigh, she decided to stop playing tough.

"Mari, I wanted to talk to you about something."

Mayumi put her elbows on the table, covered her mouth with a hand, and spoke to Mari. It wasn't very good manners, but this was the easiest position to take so that nobody would be able to read her lips. They allowed students to use soundproofing fields in the cafeteria but not spells that would block light so you couldn't see inside.

"What is it?"

Mari assumed the same pose. From afar, they almost had their foreheads touching, adding to the feeling of secrecy.

"Mari, you know Nakura, right?"

"Your bodyguard? What about him?"

"Well, he's been killed."

"Killed—wait, what? ...When did that happen?"

Mari was about to wonder aloud how she said that with a straight face, but

seeing the swirl of combined sadness, annoyance, and rage in Mayumi's eyes, she switched to a question midway through.

"It happened the day before yesterday, probably late at night. The Kyoto police called me yesterday."

"Kyoto? You weren't the one they were after, then?"

"Yes."

"I see..."

Mari nearly let out a sigh of relief but managed to stop herself. She was pretending to be calm, but in her mind, she was rattled and on the verge of panic. She'd been frantically wondering what she would do if Mayumi was being targeted. When it turned out to be a needless fear for the moment, she finally regained enough mental leeway to lament the dead.

"I'm so sorry for your loss..."

"Thanks."

A subdued air drifted between them. Perhaps, during that wordless time, they offered a silent prayer for the dead.

"Do they know what happened? Was it an accident?"

"Homicide."

Mari expected that answer, too. That was always a risk when you were a bodyguard for the Ten Master Clans.

"But they don't know why."

Her friend across from her was desperately holding in her emotions, lest they explode out of her. Mari didn't have to ask her or observe her to know that.

"My father only said he'd made him go to Kyoto for a job. He wouldn't tell me anything about what the work was for or what kind it was. Obviously it was something shady, but for it to be something he could lose his life to..."

She heard a noise from Mayumi's throat that sounded like a swallow. It was, without a doubt, a sob.

"But I don't want to go on a hunt for vengeance," continued Mayumi,

managing to calm her emotions, making her voice sound even more willful. “I don’t, but— I don’t know, I feel like this is something I can’t ignore. Something I can’t leave alone.”

“Is it? Is anything backing you up on that?” pointed out Mari calmly despite being overwhelmed by her will.

“Not yet. I just have a gut feeling I have to do *something*. But I can’t ignore it. It’s driving me crazy.”

“I can’t...make much more time, by the way.”

The Magic University and the Defense Academy weren’t too far away—more specifically, the Magic University and the special combat graduate course’s separate building weren’t far from each other. Additionally, magician students were exempted from living in dorms out of recognition for the necessity to keep family or school magic information and personal spells a secret, so it wasn’t hard for the two of them to meet.

But like Mari said, the Defense Academy curriculum didn’t give much freedom compared to the Magic University. In fact, they had so many other things to do in their first year besides their mandatory drills that they basically had no free time at all. Mari personally wanted to do something for her distressed close friend, but schedule-wise, it was impossible.

“...Why not ask Juumonji or Tatsuya about it?”

Mayumi’s eyes widened at the sudden and unexpected—for her, at least—names being dropped. She blinked several times in a fluster. “Juumonji I would understand, but...why Tatsuya?”

“The Thesis Competition this year is in Kyoto, right?”

Mayumi felt Mari’s answer wasn’t good enough. “They’ll only be staying two days and one night for the competition, won’t they? And they’ll be so busy with other things, they won’t have any time to spare.”

“You know what happened last year. Won’t they at least go to check the place out beforehand?”

“Well, maybe. But knowing Tatsuya, he’ll probably be helping with the

presentation and doing student council work. He's so busy, and if I went through the trouble of going there myself... What's that look for?" Mayumi asked Mari, noticing the fed-up look she was being given.

"There's no point in either of us thinking about all that. Can't you just ask him?"

It was such an obvious thing that Mayumi couldn't even grasp a fragment of an argument.

"And why are you so worried about bothering *him* anyway?" Mari continued. "If you want help, wouldn't you go to Juumonji first? He's in university, too, and way more accommodating than Tatsuya. If I had to say who was more reliable, I'd say Juumonji."

"Well, I, er... I guess I don't want to bother the Juumonji family with Saegusa issues, since we're both part of the Ten Master Clans..."

Mari wasn't listening to those excuses. She heard them as sound, but she was completely ignoring the words they made. "Mayumi, don't tell me."

"Tell...you what?"

The expression Mari gave her was not the mean kind of someone teasing their good friend, but an oddly serious one that seemed sincerely worried about her.

"You're not *actually* in love with him, are you?"

It took a few seconds before her words sank fully into Mayumi's mind.

"With him...? You mean with Tatsuya?!"

"Don't yell, you moron!"



Mayumi had a soundproofing field up, so their voices would never leak outside, but her sudden outburst was enough to make Mari forget that.

“That would be impossible! Yes—impossible! Tatsuya? I would never seriously con...consider...”

Mari watched her stammering friend coolly. “Mayumi, *considering* what you look like right now, can you say for certain it’s out of the question?”

“Well, I...”

Her voice, lacking confidence, faded out.

But she wasn’t finished yet. Determined, she looked up and stuck out her chest.

“No, no, that’s definitely impossible. Impossible—just not possible.”

“...You seem awfully confident about that, but the way you say it isn’t the least bit convincing.”

“Tatsuya is a reliable boy. Like a younger brother. Yes, a little brother!”

“Well, uh, he’s not, though. You don’t have any blood relation, which I’m pretty sure you know?”

“Yes—and it’s the right of a big sister to make her little brother help her! Okay, time to make Tatsuya help me get to the bottom of this. First, I’ll check his schedule for going to Kyoto.”

“Listen to me, you...”

With Mayumi forcibly bringing things to a strange conclusion, Mari buried her face on the table, her expression utterly exhausted.



Sunday, October 14. Tatsuya was visiting the Magic Association’s Kanto branch in Yokohama.

After telling his name to the receptionist, he let them know he had a prior appointment.

The one whom he had it with was already waiting in the meeting room.

“It’s good to see you again, Hayama. Did I make you wait?”

“Not at all—you’re right on time, Mr. Tatsuya. I was the one who called you, so it is only natural I’d arrive first. Please don’t worry yourself any further in that regard.”

Tatsuya bowed, then went across from Hayama.

They both sat down at the same time as though they’d arranged it beforehand. Of the sofas here, Tatsuya felt like the cushions were a little firm, but it would help him keep his edge nicely.

He was the one to get things rolling. “You wanted to talk about something regarding this job, right?”

“Yes. I hear you were attacked in Nara the other day. I trust you were not injured?”

“I’m fine. Miyuki and the others didn’t suffer so much as a scratch, either. I’m grateful for your concern.”

“That’s good to hear. Well, even in the worst case, you would never be defeated by people such as those. Incidentally, do you know who your assailants were?”

“I don’t know anything for certain. The army’s intelligence department intervened, and I haven’t been able to look into the details.”

“I see—the intelligence department.”

An exchange of jabs, of truth mixed with falsehood. Just as Tatsuya wasn’t telling him everything he knew, Hayama was probably hiding certain things, too. Actually, in this particular conversation, Hayama had said essentially nothing.

“I apologize. That’s why I haven’t gotten any results that I can report.”

“Not at all. Simply having acquired the Kudou family’s help is enough fruit to sate the mistress.”

Tatsuya studied Hayama’s face in a way that wouldn’t be rude. Unfortunately, his powers of insight couldn’t discern whether his suggestion that Maya would be happy with that was true or just lip service.

“In that case, I’d like to continue with my current direction.”

“That will be fine.”

In any case, Tatsuya could only accept having secured freedom of movement.
“Has there been any new information on the Kuroba’s end?”

“No, there’s been no progress there, either.”

Was he giving minimal answers so as not to grant Tatsuya any means of deduction? Even a distrustful thought such as that flashed through his mind.

“In any case, Mr. Tatsuya. I had you come here today in order to convey a message from the mistress and to hear your opinion.”

“All right.” Of course he had. He wouldn’t have been done after only asking about the search progress.

“The mistress wishes to ask if you require any additional aid.”

“Additional aid...?”

Tatsuya couldn’t immediately respond to the unexpected words. He’d never even considered Maya would dispatch any reinforcements.

But this was a good opportunity, he thought. He’d actually planned to make use of Hayama or Mitsugu and keep it secret from Maya, but if Maya wanted to send him reinforcements, accepting them would leave the least bad taste in his mouth.

“Hayama. You instructed Fumiya and Ayako to purposely ignore the ones tailing them when you had them deliver the letter containing my mission, didn’t you?”

Hayama tilted his head, his face straight, at Tatsuya’s words. “Oh? No, I never gave them any such instructions...”

He didn’t look like he was feigning ignorance. But looking at the situation after that, it was clear such instructions had existed.

“Oh—now that you mention it, Hanabishi was talking to Mr. Fumiya about something.”

“Did he?”

Hanabishi ranked second-highest among the Yotsuba servants. He was an outsider magician whom the Yotsuba had scouted, and while his magic power was average, he was a retired soldier with plenty of combat experience. In the Yotsuba family, he was in charge of schedule adjustments and providing equipment for their *shadier* magic-related jobs. In a sense, the butler was the Yotsuba's control tower.

"Hanabishi would never give such instructions at his own discretion, would he?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but I honestly don't know any more than that."

That was a lie. There was no way Maya's confidant wouldn't know something as important as a leak of information regarding Tatsuya and Miyuki. Tatsuya aside, Miyuki was a candidate for the next head of the family.

But if Hayama told him he didn't know, Tatsuya didn't have any way to pursue further. He decided to change his angle of attack. "I see. But it seems certain that Fumiya was tailed. We also had a synthetic spirit spying on our house, *and* we were attacked in front of the nearest station."

"I was not aware... Mr. Tatsuya, I do apologize. I will be sure to ask Hanabishi for all the details."

"No, it's over and done with now, so I don't really mind."

"Then...?"

"To tell the truth, it seems Traditionalist agents are making frequent appearances around our classmates."

"Hmm... That must be a concern for both of you."

"Yes. At the moment, I'm handling things with the goodwill of the Kitayama family and the Ninefold Temple. Would you mind recommending to Maya that she assist them?"

"I see. Allaying future anxiety is the foundation of tactics. And Lady Maya would never leave an obstacle untouched."

"Thank you. I don't want to bother Master any more than I already have."

Behind this remark was a veiled threat—allow Yakumo's intervention any

more, and they would not be falsely accused but correctly accused of things they would rather not be known. But did Hayama understand that? Tatsuya hoped he did, for the sake of *both* the Yotsuba and Yakumo, but he didn't say it outright.

"By the way, Mr. Tatsuya, speaking of the Ninefold Temple..."

Maybe Hayama's sudden change of topic was an indication that he didn't wish to proceed with this line of conversation any further, either.

"I hear you have been working on development of a new spell at the Ninefold Temple."

"You knew about that?" The surprise on Tatsuya's face wasn't an act. He really had no idea when or how they'd learned about it.

"It was simply a guess. We are quite aware of the things below the temple."

"I see—that was a clever trick just now."

Tatsuya faked a frustrated expression, but *that* was an act. He was relieved, first and foremost, that there wasn't an obvious hole in information control, and the new magic development itself was basically ready to go public anyway. It was actually good timing for someone to give him a pickoff throw.

"As you say, I've been borrowing the Ninefold Temple basement to develop a new attack spell."

"May I ask what sort of spell it is?"

"Of course. I don't have anything I need to keep from Aunt Maya." Prefacing it with a blank face and a complete lie, he answered Hayama's question. "The magic I'm currently developing is a close-range physical attack spell. I believe you've read over the report concerning the Brionac, which Angie Sirius of the Stars used."

"Are you attempting to reproduce the Brionac, then?"

"The logic is subtly different, but the base concept is the same. To tell the truth, I had an opponent at First High in April against whom Mist Dispersion wouldn't work."

"The Tomitsuka family's Range Zero?"

“So you were aware. It was a wake-up slap at the time. As Miyuki’s Guardian, I decided I needed to prioritize developing a spell that could fend off opponents whom Dismantle isn’t effective on.”

Hayama nodded deeply to Tatsuya’s words, whether sincerely or not. “I admire your dedication.”

“Once this spell is complete, it will not only be able to penetrate Range Zero’s psionic armor, but likely the Juumonji family’s Phalanx as well. I should be able to unveil it *by the New Year*.”

For a moment, a dangerous look flashed across Hayama’s face. But it reverted to his gentle butler face so quickly, it seemed like an illusion. “Have you decided on a name for the spell yet?”

“It’s not finished yet, so it’s a temporary name, but...”

“Go ahead, if you will.”

“When it is complete, I plan to name it Baryon Lance.”

“...That sounds quite promising. I look forward to seeing it alongside Lady Miyuki when the New Year arrives,” said Hayama, standing up.

Tatsuya felt like it was time to wrap things up as well. “Thank you for talking to Maya about my school friends’ safety.”

“Yes—all so that you may devote yourself to the mission, Mr. Tatsuya.”

Tatsuya bowed to Hayama, then left the meeting room.

They shared no handshake between them.



Monday, October 15.

Amid the hustle and bustle of its Thesis Competition preparations, First High was today wrapped up in a new stir.

Mayumi Saegusa, formerly student council president, had come wielding her position as eldest daughter of the Saegusa of the Ten Master Clans to seek a meeting with Tatsuya Shiba. News of the event quickly captured the students’ interest.

As the student body traded excited gossip, there were several specific students who couldn't remain lighthearted at such ominous tidings.

Gyoubu Hattori, previous club committee chairman.

Honoka Mitsui, student council treasurer.

And Miyuki, current student council president and Tatsuya's younger sister, felt an unspeakable disquiet when Tatsuya and Mayumi disappeared into the reception room together.

(Continued in Part II)

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *The Irregular at Magic High School* so fondly and regularly. For those I've yet to meet, I hope you continue to support this series in the future.

How did you enjoy reading the first main story arc in a while? I've had many opportunities to write side stories recently, and this felt a little refreshing even to me as I was typing at my keyboard. All in all, it's great to be back to it. It makes me feel like I'm composing a story I personally want to give form to. It was fun to write the side stories as well, but I think I can put more of my heart and soul into this.

Contrary to the schedule, the Ancient City Insurrection arc ended up being a two-part series, but considering it's this episode in which an important character named Minoru Kudou first makes his debut, I can justify it to myself and say it was better this way. Another rival will be deeply involved in the story in the second part, making for a splendid costarring of characters, so please look forward to that.

Something else that we hadn't initially intended was that the first part ended up being the Nara arc and the second part the Kyoto arc. And despite that, I'd find it hard to say I wrote enough scenes set in Nara, which is my greatest regret for this volume. I'd like to depict the local sights more properly in the second part.

As for the Nine School Competition sub-episodes, which I touched on in the afterword in Volume 13, I'd like to somehow get started on that within the year. If I don't get it out there soon—well, it has a few inside stories that might impede how the main story progresses, so... I'm sorry, and I'll do my best. (sweat)

Around the time this book hits store shelves, the anime will be reaching its

climax, too. Just as some things were only written in the novels, other things were only depicted in the anime, so please enjoy both of them. And if you check out the Blu-ray and DVD releases as well, I think you'll be able to enjoy them even more. (laugh)

Now then, I sincerely hope that you will do me the honor of reading the next volume, *Ancient City Insurrection Arc, Part II*, as well.

I hope for your continued support of *The Irregular at Magic High School* in the future.

Tsutomu Sato

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